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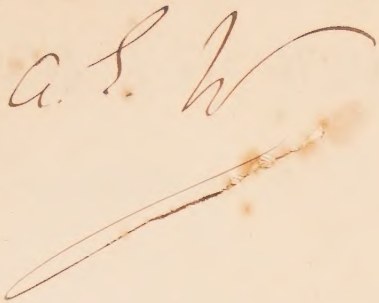

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FLOWER AND WEED;

AND OTHER TALES.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET," "ISHMAEL," "VIXEN,"
"PHANTOM FORTUNE,"

ETC. ETC. ETC.

Stereotyped Edition

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FLOWER AND WEED.

CHAPTER I.

A WAYSIDE WAIF.

'A lovely child she was, of looks serene,
And motions which o'er things indifferent shed
The grace and gentleness from whence they came.'

INGLESHAW CASTLE is one of the historic homes of England, built in the days of the Plantagenets, improved and expanded under the last of the Tudors, and never debased or deteriorated by modern alterations, adaptations, or restorations. It stands on low ground, in the heart of an extensive chase, full of deer and ground game—a wild woodland, where many of the oaks and beeches are as old as the establishment of the house of Ingleshaw amongst the ruling families of England. The Castle is built of dark-gray stone, rich in those lovely gradations from deepest purple to palest green which mark the long growth of lichens and mosses, stealthily stealing over the stony surface, and touching it with beauty. There is a grand simplicity about the noble Gothic entrance, and the great square hall with its vaulted roof; while there is all the charm of quaintness and homeliness in the long low passages, the deep-set windows, with here a bay and there an oriel, to break the monotony of long rows of heavily mullioned casements, giving an insufficient light to the dusky old portraits and seventeenth-century pictures which line the panelled walls of the low spacious rooms.

Ingleshaw is one of the show places of Kent, but it is only shown when the family is away; and on this bright May morning the family, beginning and ending with Lord Ingleshaw and his only child, Lady Lucille, is at home;

and the tourist, thirsting to steep himself in the historic associations of the Castle, turns from the gate with reluctant feet. Perhaps there never was a more quiet household than this of Ingleshaw Castle. There is something akin to pain in the silence of the long corridors and the empty suites of rooms, where the effigies of departed Ingleshaws stare for ever at vacancy; where a bee comes booming in at an open pane in the mullioned window, hovers over a bowl of hot-house flowers on a Florentine marble table, and goes booming out again, disgusted at the dulness of life within stone walls. Sometimes the ripple of girlish laughter floats through an open window of the southern wing, or the bird-like notes of a girlish soprano are heard in the distance, singing one of Mozart's tenderest melodies.

Lord Ingleshaw is something of a recluse, and his only daughter has not yet made her entrance upon the bustling theatre of society, to be elbowed and hustled by that common herd to which the doting father deems his child infinitely superior. Her eighteenth birthday is drawing near, and next year, the father tells himself, his innocent simple-minded darling must needs be handed over to the high priestesses of the temple of fashion; must take her place in society, be wooed, won, and wedded; and then it would be to him almost as if he had no daughter. New associations, new loves, new joys, new hopes, new cares, would arise for her who was now all his own.

'Well, it is the common lot,' he muses, dreaming in his library over an open folio of Bacon's *Essays*. 'I must wait for a girl-grandchild, whom I may train up to be something like the companion and friend my little girl has been to me. She will last my time. I shall be dead and gone before *she* need be presented at Court.'

He has a fixed idea that from the hour his daughter enters society she will be in great measure lost to him. This comes, perhaps, from his profound contempt for modern society, which he despises the more intensely because he has held himself aloof from the vortex, and only contemplates its foolishness from the outside. This external view of fashionable life is like a deaf man's view of a ball-room. Lord Ingleshaw sees the puppets dancing, without hearing the music which is their motive power; and the whole thing seems rank folly: folly treading on the heels of vice.

His sister, Lady Carlyon, a dowager countess, passing young for her years, as all dowager peeresses are nowadays, a lady who lives in society and for society, has told him that

Lucille must take her proper place in the world, must be seen and admired and talked about, and even written about in the newspapers, before she can be properly and creditably married; and he is prepared to submit to the inevitable. He would rather his girl should be wooed by the interchange of a miniature and a few formal letters, and wedded by proxy, like a princess of the seventeenth century. Anything would be better than the turmoil and dissipation of fashionable society, the rubbing shoulders with doubtful beauty and tarnished rank, the inevitable brushing away of youth's tenderest bloom, sinless Eve's primitive innocence. One little year yet remains to the fond father. Lucille is not to be presented till next season. The Earl has begged hard for this extension of his happiness.

'She will be horridly old by that time,' says Lady Carlyon, in her hard business-like way, staring at the unconscious Lucille, who is playing a dreamy gondolied of Mendelssohn's at the other end of the long low parlour. 'I'm afraid she is one of those girls whose looks will go off early. Half the beauty of her eyes depends upon that cabbage-rose bloom of hers. Nothing tells so well as youthful freshness just now. It is the only attraction with which we can counter those horrid professional beauties. If Lucie's complexion goes off you can keep her at Ingleshaw all your life, for she will not secure an eligible *parti*.'

'My heart's desire is to keep her here for ever,' answers the Earl; 'you talk of her as if she were a Circassian slave, waiting for the next market.'

'That's stuff and nonsense,' exclaimed Lady Carlyon; 'I suppose you would like your daughter to make a good marriage?'

'I should like her to marry a good man.'

'Well, we'll try to combine the two, though it isn't the easiest thing in the world.'

This conversation took place in the Easter holidays, which Lady Carlyon spent with her brother and her niece, trying her hardest to inspire Lucille with a thirst for the amusements and delights of that privileged circle she was soon to enter, and making only a very faint impression upon the girl's mind. A cup which is already full can hold no more; and Lucie's life at Ingleshaw was completely happy. She adored her father—the father who had been all the world of kindred and affection to the motherless girl; she loved her good-natured old governess, Miss Marjorum, who had taught and trained her from her fifth year until now. She loved

the historic old house, the romantic chase, the old gardens, lawns, and summer-houses, fish-pond, bowling-green, arbours, fountains—that happy blending of the Dutch and Italian style which gave such variety to the extensive grounds. She loved the grave gray old stable, the pretty little mouse-coloured Norwegian ponies which she drove, the senile white cob which she was permitted to ride unattended about the chase, and the handsome young bay mare, which she rode on rare and happy occasions, by her father's side. She had dogs, cats, and pets of all kinds. Most of the servants had seen her grow up, and all of them worshipped her. She lived in an atmosphere of love, and had never any sense of dulness in the silent old house, to which so few visitors came.

Lord Ingleshaw was by no means a cipher in his world, although he held himself aloof from fashionable society. He was a stanch Conservative and a strong politician, voted upon all important measures, spoke occasionally, and had weight and influence in his party. He had a house in Grosvenor Square, where he occupied three darksome rooms on the ground-floor, leaving the upper and more splendid apartments to gloom and disuse. The brief, bright, happy period of his wedded life had been spent partly in this house; and the rooms were haunted by the sweet sad shadow of his young wife, who died of a fever caught in Venice six months after her baby's birth. For the greater part of the year he lived at Ingleshaw, a bookworm and a recluse, caring very little for any society except that of his young daughter.

Father and child had breakfasted *tête-à-tête* this bright May morning in a pretty little room called the Painted Parlour—a cheery little room, with painted panels, all over flowers and butterflies, in a graceful fashion that savoured of the Pompadour period. May was fast melting into June, and the windows were wide open, and the room was filled with perfume from within and from without; flowers on tables, chimney-piece, window ledges, and a wilderness of flowers in the garden outside.

'What are you going to do with yourself this morning, pet?' asked the Earl, as his daughter hung over his chair. 'Don't go and mew yourself up with Miss Marjorum in this delicious weather. All the other butterflies are enjoying their lives in the garden.'

'I hope you don't think me quite so frivolous as the butterflies, father? Yes, it is a too delicious morning. I

meant to read Dante with Miss Marjorum directly after breakfast; but I think I shall keep those poor things in the second circle waiting an hour or two while I have a ramble on Puck. Dear old Marjy won't mind.'

She kissed her father, and was running off, when he stopped her.

'O, by-the-bye, Lucie, I've some news for you. I had a telegram from Bruno last night.'

'From Bruno!' she cried with clasped hands, while a lovely roseate hue crept over the alabaster fairness of her face and throat; 'and you never told me!'

'Well, I suppose I wanted to keep this bit of news for a pleasant surprise: only I never could keep a secret from my girl. The telegram is from Florence, and Bruno is coming home almost directly. He will come straight here. You can tell Twyford to have his rooms got ready.'

'Almost directly!' repeated Lucille. 'What does that mean, father? To-day?'

'Hardly. He was in Florence yesterday.'

'True, and Florence is at the other end of the world—a three days' journey at least. To think of his coming home so soon! His last letter was so vague.'

'Will you be glad to have him at Ingleshaw?'

'Of course I shall be glad; but I shall see very little of him. He will be always rushing away somewhere—trout-fishing; or to London, or to Sevenoaks, or Tunbridge Wells. Thank goodness the hunting is all over. He can't be riding off at nine o'clock every morning to come home at half-past seven, steeped in mud.'

'Make the most of him while you have him,' said her father. 'He is a man now, and will have to take his place in the world as the future Lord Ingleshaw.'

The girl dropped lightly on her father's knee, and nestled her head in his bosom.

'Don't!' she cried. 'I can't bear you to talk of anybody coming after you. God grant that Bruno's head may be as white as snow before he is Lord Ingleshaw.'

'That would be to doom your father to long years of senility. However, Bruno is in no hurry, and I am in no hurry. He has a fair fortune, considerable talents, and I hope he will distinguish himself as Mr. Challoner before he is Lord Ingleshaw. And now run away and have your ramble. I shall be off to catch the express in half an hour; and I have to see Morley before I go.'

Morley was his lordship's land-steward and factotum.

'Dear father, I am so sorry you must go to London. I hope you will be back before Sunday.'

'Be sure I sha'n't stop in town longer than I am obliged; but I must wait to see this measure through the House.'

'How I hate measures and the House, when they take you away from me!' said Lucille.

Now came tender farewell caresses; and then the girl raced off to the distant rooms which belonged to her and her governess. She had come to a delicious period of her life, in which the bondage of the schoolroom was done with, while the restraints of society had not yet begun. In her own small world, so safely hedged round by reverence and affection, she did very much as she liked, went where she liked, spent as much money as she liked, cultivated the people she liked. She was in some wise mistress of her father's house. She ruled the trusty old governess who had once ruled her: but though somewhat wilful as to those things upon which her impetuous young heart set itself, she was as docile and easily governed by a light hand as a thoroughbred horse.

'Marjy, Marjy!' she cried, bursting into the old schoolroom, now morning-room and study, where Miss Marjorum sat with dictionaries and grammars and Italian histories laid out before her, ready for tackling Dante,—'such news! Bruno is coming. Bruno will be here to-morrow, or, at furthest, the day after to-morrow! "And the bells shall be rung, and mass shall be sung,"' sang Lucie at the top of her clear young voice, 'for my Red-cross knight.'

'This is indeed a surprise,' said Miss Marjorum, without turning a hair. 'Mr. Challoner coming to us after nearly two years' absence! I have no doubt he will be grown.'

'Don't, Marjy; you mustn't say such things. It's actually insulting! Don't you know that Bruno is four-and-twenty?'

'Then he will have expanded,' said Miss Marjorum. 'It seems only yesterday that he came of age; and I know that up to that time he was continually growing in a perpendicular direction. After that he began to widen and spread horizontally, and he has been expanding ever since.'

'Marjy, dearest, you talk as if he were Falstaff, or bluff King Hal,' cried the girl.

'My dear, all I wish to express is that he is a well-grown young man. And now, my love, let us attack our Dante. We are approaching one of the finest passages in the *Inferno*.'

'Marjy, dear, it is such a delicious morning, and this news

about Bruno is so exciting, I think if I were to ramble in the chase for an hour or so, it would compose my mind, and make me more equal to Dante.'

'You must do as you like, my love; but I never find your intellect so much on the alert after those rambles in the chase. There is a marked tendency to yawning and inattention.'

'You shall find me attentive to-day, dearest. But I must have one peep at the bluebells in Hazel Hollow. Think what a little while they last!'

'As you advance in life, Lady Lucille, you'll find that all earthly pleasures are as brief as the bloom of wild hyacinths,' said Miss Marjorum, who fancied it a part of her duty to be for ever repeating trite moral lessons, and scraps of old-world wisdom.

Lucille skipped off to her dressing-room to put on the short-skirted shabby old habit in which she rode Puck; and then, light and swift of foot, she ran down the broad oak staircase to a door that opened into the stable-yard, where a groom was waiting with Puck, a shaggy grey cob, of the Exmoor breed, stoutly built, strong as a house, with an eye which beamed with kindness. Lucille generally mounted at this door, preferring to escape the ceremony of going forth under the great Gothic archway, where the prim matron who lived in the gateway turret looked out at her through the lattice of the parlour where the visitors' book was kept, or stood in the doorway to curtsey to her as she went by. The stable-yard opened into the park, and Lucille was away and out of sight of the Castle in five minutes.

It was one of those exquisite mornings when to live and breathe the sweetness of the air is rapture; when the old feel young, and the young can scarce tread soberly upon the dull earth, moved to dance-measures by the ecstasy of mere existence. The soft, warm, flowery air crept round Lucille like a caress, as she rode slowly along a grassy ride, under the broad spreading boughs of a line of horse-chestnuts, the turf white with the fallen blossoms, and yet the trees bright with lingering bloom. Further on in the green heart of the chase came a little wood of Spanish chestnuts, leafy towers, their lowest boughs sweeping the grass, their summits aspiring to the blue bright sky. These grand old trees were planted wide apart, and the intervening ground was a sheet of azure bloom, save here and there where the drift of last year's withered leaves showed a patch of golden brown starred with wood anemones.

Beyond this chestnut plantation there stretched an undulating expanse of open sward, with here a beech and there an oak, standing up against the summer sky in solitary grandeur, monarchs of the woodland; and then came those wide oak and fir plantations which bordered the chase for the breadth of half a mile or so throughout the seven miles of its circumference, rough and broken ground, full of gentle hollows and ridgy slopes, the paradise of squirrels, rabbits, and wild flowers. Puck knew every inch of those plantations, for he and his mistress had roamed about in them at all hours and in all weathers; sometimes when the snow lay deep in the hollows, and the first of the wild snowdrops showed pale on the topmost ridges where the sun had touched them.

Puck was accustomed to take his ease in these woods, tethered to a tree, while Lucille wandered on foot among the brown fir trunks, the gray lichen-clothed oaks, botanising, entomologising, sketching, or musing, as her fancy prompted. Her childhood and girlhood had been passing lonely, save for Bruno Challoner's occasional companionship; and she had learnt to find her own amusements and her own occupations; more especially when the Earl was in London, or at Aix or Wiesbaden for his health, and life in the Castle meant a perpetual *tête-à-tête* with Miss Marjorum, who possessed every amiable quality except the power to amuse. In these woods Lucille had learned her lessons, day after day, from earliest spring to latest autumn; here she had read her favourite poets; here she had become familiar with all that is practical and interesting in the history of flowers and insects. The woods had been her playroom and study ever since she could remember. To-day she let Puck crawl his slowest pace along the grassy rides, stumbling a little now and then in a sleepy way, and recovering himself with a jerk. She was thinking of that distant cousin of hers, Bruno Challoner, heir presumptive to yonder gray old castle, and the only friend and playfellow she had ever known, since the Vicar's four daughters, who were allowed to drink tea with her three or four times a year at the utmost, were a good deal older than herself, and could hardly be called companions.

Bruno had spent a considerable portion of all his summer holidays at Ingleshaw. He had come here in the Long Vacation when he was an undergraduate of Christ Church; had read here—or made belief to read—with 'coaches,' classical and mathematical, soberly clad gentlemen, in

smoke-coloured spectacles, who had grown prematurely old in a perpetual grinding at Plato and Aristotle, or the integral and differential calculus; men who were steeped in stale tobacco, and who avoided Lucille as if she were a pestilence, so deep was their loathing of her sex. The classical coach was tall and thin, and wore his hair long. He had written poetry, and saw life on its Greek and ideal side. The mathematician was short, broad and florid, and believed in nothing that could not be expressed by signs and figures.

Bruno went in enthusiastically for the Greek plays and the higher mathematics, but did not come out very strongly in either branch of learning. He got his degree, but it was by the skin of his teeth, as his tutor told him candidly. Since those Oxford days he had travelled a good deal for the improvement of his mind, at the instigation of Lord Ingleshaw, who was his guardian as well as his cousin; and now he was four-and-twenty, had been free of his kinsman's tutelage for the last three years, but was still beholden to him for counsel and friendship. He had made the tour of Europe, seen a little of Africa, and was coming home to begin the world as a man who, by the dignity of his future, and by all the traditions of his race, was constrained to make some figure on the stage of life.

'Dear old Bruno,' thought Lucille, as she moved slowly, with sauntering rhythmical motion, under the flickering lights and shadows, amidst the aromatic odours of the pines, 'how glad I shall be to see him again! I wonder whether he will be as glad to see me?'

She remembered their last parting, when she was not quite sixteen, and still had something of the awkwardness and shyness of early girlhood. She remembered the grave tenderness of his farewell, and how he had entreated her to think of him while he was far away; promising that in every day of his wandering life some loving thought of her, like a winged invisible messenger, should fly homeward to dear old Ingleshaw. Her desk was full of his letters from strange and ever-changing places; her rooms were beautified with his gifts. He had given her substantial reason to know that she had not been forgotten.

A feeble shy from the old pony—Puck, who seldom shied—startled the girl from her reverie. The drooping eyelids were lifted; and there, beside the broad green track, lying in the hollow of a dry shallow ditch, among mosses and bluebells, and the last of the anemones, Lucille beheld the cause of Puck's alarm.

A woman, quite a young woman—nay, a girl in what should have been the first fresh bloom of girlhood—lay asleep in that mossy hollow, the azure of wild hyacinths reflected on her wan pinched cheek, one wasted hand lying pale and deathlike among the flowers. The scanty cotton gown hardly concealed the shrunken outline of the figure. The feet, one bound in blood-stained rags, the other in a boot which was the veriest apology for covering, testified to long and weary tramping upon dusty high-roads.

Lucille slipped from her saddle, and, with Puck's bridle hanging on her arm, went close up to the prostrate figure It was not the first time she had found a tramp asleep in Ingleshaw woods, nor the first time that her immediate impulse had been to relieve abject poverty, worthy or worthless, needing no higher claim upon her charity than its helplessness. She stood looking down at the sleeper, more keenly interested than she had ever felt before in any stray creature she had found in her domain.

The face lying among the flowers was exquisitely beautiful, even in its pinched and haggard condition. The low broad brow, the delicate Greek nose, the heavily-moulded eyelids, with their dark lashes, the oval cheek from which the rich growth of bronze-brown hair was swept back in a tangled mass, the melancholy lines of the pale lips, the modelling of the small dimpled chin—all were perfect, and on all there was the stamp of sickness unto death. What could Lucille do? She had no purse with her; or perhaps she might have done no more than drop a sovereign into that shrunken hand, and pass upon her way. Yet there was something in the sleeper's face that would have haunted her painfully afterwards, had her charity gone no further than this. As it was, she tied Puck to a tree, and sat down at the root of another, within a yard or so of the sleeper, patiently to await her waking, in order to see what could be done with her.

She had not long to wait. Before she had been seated five minutes, looking dreamily at the sulphur-hued butterflies flitting across the mossy hollows where the hyacinths made broad patches of azure light, the flies grew too tormenting for Puck's patience. A sharp shake of his honest old gray head rattled bit and bridle, and at the sound that pale sleeper stirred uneasily, and the heavy lids were lifted from eyes darker than night.

Those dark velvety eyes looked up at Lucille, the pallid lips quivered faintly, and, as if with a painful effort, the wayfarer lifted herself into a sitting position.

'Lady,' she murmured in a low hoarse voice; and then the tears gathered in the large dark eyes and rolled slowly down the haggard cheeks.

'Are you ill, or in pain?' asked Lucille gently.

'I have been ill, lady. I was laid up in the infirmary at the Union in London with a fever, and then I got a little better, and they turned me out; and I set out to walk to Dover, where I've a friend; but last night I was quite done, and I slept under a haystack a little way from here; and when I woke this morning I could hardly move, but I just crawled across a field, and in through a gap in the fence, and the place was cool and quiet, so I laid down to sleep, or to die—I didn't much care which. You wouldn't if you was me.'

'You mustn't talk like that,' said Lucille. 'Are you hungry?'

'Not now, lady. I'm past that.'

'And you are very tired?'

'Tired! Yes; all my bones ache with tiredness.'

'How old are you?'

'Somewheres between seventeen and eighteen. That's as much as I know.'

'Have you no parents?'

'Never had none to remember.'

'No relatives or friends?'

'None, except him that's at Dover.'

'What is your name?'

'Bess.'

'Your surname?'

'Never knowed. I was allus called Bess.'

Lucille reflected for a minute or so, and then made up her mind what must be done with this worn-out wayfarer. It was more than a mile to the Castle, and it was evident that the girl could hardly walk half a dozen yards. She had dropped from sheer exhaustion. To offer her food and comfort and shelter at the end of a mile's walk would be as meaningless as to offer her a refuge in one of the stars without supplying the means of transit. No, there was only one thing to be done: Puck must carry this poor creature to the Castle.

'I want to take you to my father's house, and to give you food and rest,' said Lucille. 'Do you think you could sit upon my pony if I were to lead him? He's very quiet.'

'I don't know, lady. I don't know as I could stand on my feet. Things look all of a swim like, as if I was in a merry-go-round.'

The weary head drooped upon Lady Lucille's shoulder as the girl spoke; the tangled dusty hair and gaudy cotton kerchief rested unrepulsed on the young lady's green habit. Never before had Lord Ingleshaw's daughter come into such close contact with squalid nameless poverty.

'We must get you on to the pony somehow,' she said. 'Rest your head against this tree while I bring him to you.'

She left the girl leaning, limp and inert, against the red-brown fir-trunk, and went over to Puck, who was contentedly nibbling the soft flowery turf at his feet. Lucille led him to the spot where Bess reclined, and then lifted the languid form from the ground, Bess giving what help she could, but that of the feeblest. She was evidently in a half-fainting condition, and would have to be held on the pony.

The aged and slumberous Puck lent himself very placidly to the operation, though wondering at it. Lucille managed to lift the helpless girl on to the saddle, and to support her in a sitting position, drooping listlessly forward over Puck's mane, as she led the pony through the plantation, and by the nearest way to the Castle, crossing the broad stretch of velvet turf in the bright May sunshine.

All that glory of sunlight and greensward, old forest trees and fallow deer, the distant gleam of the lake in the hollow, the grandeur of the old Castle standing grim and gray against a wooded background, was lost on Bess, whose head was never raised from its drooping posture, and for whom this terrestrial globe was just now a dim dream hovering on the verge of darkness. It needed but the faintest swing of Life's pendulum to make all dark.

Lucille went into the stable-yard with her strange companion. It was dinner-time, and the men were away, all things in the yard still and slumberous as in the castle of the Sleeping Beauty; but at the sound of the pony's hoofs an old man came out of the stables, and advanced to meet his master's daughter.

This was Tom Pike, the old groom who had special charge of Puck. He had taught Lady Lucille to ride, before she was advanced enough for her father to take her in hand, and he worshipped her. So when she told him to take the tatterdemalion in his arms and carry her into the Castle, he had no power to gainsay her, albeit he felt the proceeding was altogether out of keeping.

One feeble protest, and one alone he made.

'Hadn't I better take her into the saddle-room, Lady Lucille? I can get her a bit of meat and drink there.'

'Nonsense, Pike; the poor thing is dreadfully ill. She wants ever so much care and nursing. Just bring her where I show you.'

Pike took Bess upon his shoulder, as if she had been a dead fawn, and carried her into the Castle, following Lucille, who led the way to a neat little bedchamber at the end of a long corridor, and very near to her own rooms. It was a room which was generally given to a visitor's maid, and had been lately occupied by Lady Carlyon's middle-aged abigail.

Here they laid the half-unconscious girl on the bed. As her head sank upon the pillow, her eyes closed, and she fell into a sleep which was almost stupor.

'Go downstairs and get me a glass of port and a piece of sponge-cake, Pike. She must have something directly. She has been starved.'

'Looks rather like it, Lady Lucille. But don't you think my lord will be angry with me for bringing such offal into the Castle? She ought to have been took straight off to the Union.'

'I will take the responsibility of bringing her here, Pike,' answered Lady Lucille. 'I am not afraid of my father being angry. He is more like the good Samaritan than the Levite.'

'In course, Lady Lucille; but you see in those days there was no Unions; and a gentleman as pays poor rates to the extent his lordship does wouldn't lay himself out to have tramps brought into his bedrooms and laid upon his beds.'

'Will you go and get me that wine, Pike, before this poor thing dies?' asked Lucille piteously; whereupon Pike bolted, like an arrow from a bow.

The ever alert Miss Marjorum, not so deep in Dante's *Inferno* as to be beyond earshot of mundane voices, heard steps in the corridor, and came tripping out to discover what was happening. She saw Pike's receding figure, and the half-open door of the bedroom; and she flew to ascertain the cause of this unwonted violation of the noontide stillness. Her horror on beholding the figure on the bed, the limp rag of gown or petticoat, the tattered shawl, the bandaged, blood-stained foot, reduced her for the moment to speechlessness. Then her loathing found words, and she exclaimed,

'Lucille, in mercy's name, WHAT is that?' pointing to the bed.

'A poor girl I found in the wood—dying of hunger and fatigue.'

'My sweet pet, come away! Lady Lucille, come away from her this instant!' shrieked the governess. 'Look how dirty she is!'

'Her clothes are dusty, Marjy dear, that's all. Her poor face is not dirty. I daresay she tried to be clean, poor, helpless thing.'

'And you brought her here—yourself! This is too dreadful!"

Just then Pike appeared with a small tumbler of port, and a hunch of sponge-cake, on a silver salver.

'O Pike, Pike, how can you aid and abet your mistress in such dreadful goings on?' asked Miss Marjorum.

Lucille took the wine, tenderly lifted the tired head upon her arm, and put the glass to the white wan lips. The girl's eyes opened, and she drank a little wine with a choking sound like a sob; and then Lucille dipped the cake into the wine, and fed her, as she had often fed a young bird.

'Lucille, come away!' exclaimed Miss Marjorum, snatching the tumbler from her pupil's hand. 'She may have some contagious disease—small-pox, perhaps.'

'Look at her beautiful face, Marjy. Does that look like small-pox?'

'I don't know; but I insist upon your leaving this room. You may have escaped from the schoolroom; you may shirk Dante; but I hope I have still a shred of authority.'

'Dearest Marjy, I will do anything in reason,' said Lucille; while Miss Marjorum sternly administered the rest of the wine, with as severe an air as if she had been offering the fatal goblet of poison to a superfluous member of some royal Indian race. 'All I want is that this poor thing may be cared for and made comfortable for the next few days.'

'In this house?' demanded Miss Marjorum.

'Certainly. I shall be very angry with any one who talks of sending her out of this house,' replied Lucille, with that air of authority which Lord Ingleshaw's only daughter very well knew how to assume upon occasion.

'I said from the first she ought to have been took to the Union,' murmured Pike, looking deferentially from the governess to her pupil, hardly knowing which of the two he most feared.

'Of course; the Union is too good for such a low creature. Look at her feet; she must have tramped for days. She must be a professional beggar.'

'She did not beg of me,' said Lucille, ringing the bell. 'You may go, Pike;' whereupon Pike pulled an imaginary forelock, and retired.

Lady Lucille's summons was answered promptly by her maid Tompion, who had been sitting at work in a room opening into the corridor.

'Tompion, I want you to take particular care of this young woman,' said Lucille. 'You will get her some soup immediately—a small cup of soup, for she has been a long time without food; and when she has eaten it, you will let her sleep as much as she likes for the next few hours. Then when she wakes you will get her a bath, and some clean linen out of my wardrobe, and one of my cotton gowns; and you will make her as comfortable as you possibly can. She is to occupy this room till she has recovered her strength. By that time I shall have made up my mind what to do with her.'

Tompion had not a word to oppose to the calm authority of these instructions. She was a strongly-built wholesome woman of about thirty, who had been Lucille's attendant since the departure of nurse and nursery-maid. She idolised her young mistress, and was devoted to her duties, although she would gladly have drawn the line at attendance upon ragged and footsore tramps.

'I'm sure I don't know however I shall get them things off her, Lady Lucille,' she said. 'I expect they'll all drop to pieces when I touch 'em, like a 'Gyptian mummy.'

'You must do your best, Tompion,' said Lucille. 'You are so kind-hearted that I know you'll be good to the poor thing.'

'Lucille, *are* you coming away?' remonstrated Miss Marjorum.

Lucille put her arm round the governess's skinny shoulders, and left the room with her. Bess had fallen asleep after that half-tumbler of port and half-dozen mouthfuls of cake. It was more nourishment than she had had for the last three days.

'Lucille, you smell of tramps,' said Miss Marjorum solemnly. 'If you take my advice, you'll give yourself a warm bath before you resume the usual occupations of the day.'

'I will take your advice, dear. That poor thing was dreadfully dusty. But is she not a lovely creature?'

'Her features may be well formed; but I cannot bring myself to see beauty in such abject degradation,' replied the governess stiffly.

'Why degraded, Marjy? Only poor and friendless and hungry. I don't see any degradation in that. Think of Him who knew not where to lay His head.'

This was attacking Jane Marjorum on her weakest and best side, for she was honestly religious.

'If I thought the girl were only poor, I would not object to your helping her,' she said; 'but I fear she belongs to the criminal classes.'

'But why, dear?'

'She looks like it,' replied Miss Marjorum, not wishing to be explicit.

She had made up her mind that the girl was too pretty to be good.

CHAPTER II.

MORE THAN KIN.

> And let me feel that warm breath here and there,
> To spread a rapture in my very hair.
> O, the sweetness of the pain!
> Give me those lips again!
> Enough! enough! It is enough for me
> To dream of thee.'

Lucille had her bath, and dressed herself in the prettiest of pale-pink gingham gowns, trimmed with pillow-lace—that pretty old-fashioned thread-lace which gives employment to many a village child in the leafy lanes of Buckinghamshire—and appeared radiant before her old governess at their *tête-à-tête* luncheon. The Earl had gone to London by the eleven o'clock express. They had the Castle all to themselves, a stately abode of quietness and peace, the old pictured faces smiling at them, or seeming to smile, in the sunlight, just as in gloomy weather the same faces seemed to frown; the perfume of myriad flowers breathing in upon them through all the open casements.

They lunched in the old schoolroom, which served them as a dining-room when the Earl was away. Opening out of this was Lucille's morning-room—a white-panelled chamber, hung with water-colours, and much adorned with old china and new books. Here, in front of the wide low Tudor window, stood Lucille's grand piano, her father's gift on her seventeenth birthday; and across the ebony case was spread a tremendous work of art in the shape of a floral design on olive-green cloth, executed in gold and colours by the patient fingers of Miss Marjorum; and on this embroidered cloth stood a low, wide Venetian glass vase full of white azaleas and gardenias, an arrangement which satisfied all the requirements of high art.

Before Lucille sat down to luncheon, she was gratified by Tompion's assurance that the tramp had eaten her soup, and was 'sleeping beautiful.'

'Don't call her a tramp, Tompion,' said Lucille; 'her name is Bess. She may be no more accustomed to tramping than you or I. It may be only an accident in her life.'

Tompion did not believe this; but was too well-trained a servant to argue, even with a mistress who had grown up to her hand.

Lucille laughed and talked gaily all luncheon-time. She was full of Bruno's return.

'What are we to do to amuse him, Marjy, now that there's no hunting or shooting?' she asked. 'We must have tennis. Those girls from the Vicarage must be allowed to come every afternoon. And we must have picnics and excursionising of all kinds. I wonder whether my father would object to my learning to throw a fly. I should so like to go trout-fishing with Bruno.'

Miss Marjorum held forth gravely on the impropriety of this suggestion.

'My dear Lucille, you really ought to remember that you might actually have been presented this season,' she said; and this was her most solemn form of reproval.

'I am very glad I wasn't,' answered the girl. 'I am most grateful to his lordship for the year's reprieve.'

'Most girls in your position would long to be out.'

'I haven't the faintest longing. I daresay I shall enjoy society very well when I am in it; and I do long for the opera, to hear all the music I know so well upon the piano, sung by grand singers. Yes, that must be too delightful. But I don't suppose I shall ever be happier than I have been at Ingleshaw.'

'My dear, however happy your lot may be, you will discover the hollowness of life,' answered Miss Marjorum, winding up a very substantial lunch with cream cheese, spring radishes, and Bath Olivers. 'We all do that as we advance in years.'

'Dear Miss Marjorum, I hope your life has not been very hollow,' said Lucille, wondering a little wherein the hollowness of such a life could lie; seeing that, for the last ten years, Jane Marjorum had lived upon the fat of the land, had been in receipt of a handsome salary, had been petted and made much of by her pupil, and most generously treated by the Earl; while her duties were ever of the lightest.

But Jane Marjorum was not taken aback by this question.

'I am one of those who find out the hollowness of life before the bloom of youth has departed,' she said, in a solemn voice. 'I was engaged for five years to a young man whom I believed an apostle. I assisted him to keep his college terms at St. Catherine's, Cambridge (vulgarly called Cat's); and no sooner was he ordained than he proved hollow.

'In what way, Marjy?'

'He sent me back my letters and presents, and told me that he should ever honour me as his friend and benefactress, but that Fate had willed that he was to fall in love with a milliner's apprentice at Cambridge, and that Duty impelled him to marry her. He is now rector of a parish in the East Riding; and that milliner's apprentice is on visiting terms with the county families,' concluded Miss Marjorum, as if this were the crowning wrong. 'So I think you will admit that *I* soon discovered the hollowness of life,' she added after a pause.

'It was very dishonourable of him,' said Lucille, wondering whether the milliner's apprentice was pretty, and wondering a little also what kind of a person dear old Marjorum was in her day of freshness and bloom. The good creature belonged to that section of the elderly whom it is almost impossible to imagine as ever having been young.

After luncheon Miss Marjorum again suggested the *Inferno;* but Lucille was in no mood for serious study. That idea of Bruno's return, added to her interest in her new *protégée,* completely filled her mind.

'It would be no use, Marjy dear,' she said; 'I should be only pretending to understand. I'll practise this afternoon; and you and I will go for a long walk after five-o'clock tea.'

She went to her beloved piano, and played Mozart's sonatas for the next two hours. It was music which she knew well, and which allowed her thoughts and fancies to wander fetterless.

Would he be much changed, this old companion of her childhood, she wondered, as her fingers ran over the airy passages of an *allegro* movement, in that close delicate playing which is the result of much careful practice? Would he despise the simple pleasures of Ingleshaw? — the woods, the rural lanes, the meadows golden with buttercups, and flushed here and there with ruddy patches of wild sorrel; the hawthorn thickets where the thrushes sang so divinely at eventide; the village church, whose old-fashioned homely services Lucille had attended all her life? Would all these things have lost their charm for him, now that he had seen every great city of Europe, steeping himself in the romance of a historical past, climbing Swiss mountains, fishing in Norwegian lakes?

'He used to be very fond of the country,' she told herself; 'but I am afraid it will all seem very small to him after the wonders he has seen abroad.'

Just before the eight-o'clock dinner Lady Lucille went to the room where the wanderer was lying. She found her much restored, but still very weak. Tompion had washed her, and put on clean linen; and the perfect face upon the pillow looked all the more beautiful now the bronze-brown hair had been carefully brushed, and was coiled in a loose plait at the back of the small head.

'How good you have been to me, lady!' she murmured softly, looking up with a grateful expression in her large dark eyes. 'I did not think there was anybody in this world so good as you.'

'Then I'm afraid you have never read the Gospel; for that would teach you that it is our duty to help the poor and friendless.'

'I'm not much of a hand at reading, lady,' the girl answered meekly. 'I've forgot most what I was taught at the ragged school when I was a little 'un. There was ladies sometimes come down the alley where I lived, and they give me tracks, and says I must read 'em if I wanted to save my soul alive; but when I came in of a night, after tramping half over London with a basket of violets or moss-rose buds, I hadn't the strength left in me to tackle one of them there tracks, which allus led off by tellin' me I was goin' to hell.'

'There is better teaching in the Gospel than in those tracts, Bess. The Gospel shows us the way to heaven. Would you like me to come and read to you a little before you compose yourself for the night?'

'Yes, lady, I should like you to come and sit by me a bit. I like to look at you, and to hear you talk; it ain't like anything as I've been used to. It's like waking up out of a bad dream and finding oneself in a new world. But you'll be for packing me off to-morrer, I dessay, sending me back to my parish, won't yer, lady?'

'No, no, you poor soul. You shall not leave the Castle till you are strong and well; and when you do go, I shall try to find you a comfortable home where you can get an honest living. We won't talk about it now. You are to think of nothing except getting well.'

'I don't know that,' answered the girl, with a plaintive look in the dark liquid eyes. 'It might be better for me just to lie here till I die, and never know nothing more of life and its troubles.'

'You shall find by-and-by that life is not all trouble; that there are a great many things in this world worth living for.'

An hour later Lady Lucille came back and read some chapters from St. John's Gospel, but not before she had gently sounded the wanderer's religious knowledge. She found her wofully ignorant, her only ideas of Gospel truth consisting of vague and patchy recollections of the New Testament as it had been expounded to her by a series of unsympathetic district visitors, so various in their views as to be eminently confusing in their teaching. Gently and briefly Lucille tried to bring before the girl's mind the grand and gracious image of a Redeemer, before she read those chapters in which Christ reveals Himself and the fair hope of a blessed immortality to His disciples.

Bess listened intently, understanding not very much perhaps—the light as yet was but a faint glimmer—but deeply interested, soothed by the sweet voice of the reader, dazzled by that idea of a spiritual world which had never before been adequately presented to her imagination. She fell asleep with faint echoes of the Saviour's words floating in her half-awakened mind.

Lucille went to see her *protégée* early next morning. Bess was refreshed and strengthened by nourishing food and rest, and was eager to get up.

'If there was anything I could do for you, lady—' she began.

'Call me Lady Lucille; that is my name.'

'Lady Lucille—that's a pretty name!—if there was anything I could do—but, Lord ha' mercy upon me! I'm such a hignorant creature, except to tramp about with a basket of flowers in spring and summer time, and to sell bootlaces or fusees in winter, I ain't good for nothink!'

'We will soon make you good for ever so many things. I am sure you are not stupid.'

'Well, no, Lady Lu—Lucille, folks mostly says I'm sharp. I could turn my hand to pretty nigh anything, if I had the chance. I've sung ballads in front o' the publics sometimes of a Saturday night: "She wore a Wreath o' Roses," and "We met," and "The Last Rose o' Summer," and such-like.'

'My maid shall teach you plain needlework. Are you clever with your needle?'

'Lord no, Lady Lucille! I never could lay hold on a needle proper. It allus slips through my fingers.'

'You will very soon learn. Every woman ought to be clever at needlework. The taste is born with us, I think.

But the first thing I want to teach you is to pray. Perhaps, though you know so little of the Gospel, you have been taught to say your prayers?'

'No, Lady Lucille; them I lived among didn't hold with praying. "What should we be the better for craw-thumping and squalling hymns?" I've heard 'em say. "That wouldn't get us a meal o' victuals."'

'Poor souls! they did not know how Christ taught us to ask our Father for all good things. Our prayers may not always be answered just as we wish, or as soon as we want; but we know they are always heard, and that God gives us what is best for us.'

'I dessay if I lived in this house I should believe that,' said Bess, to whom the plainest bedchamber in Ingleshaw Castle was like an arbour in the Garden of Eden.

Lucille taught her to repeat the Lord's Prayer, and one of those ejaculatory verses in the Psalms, which, after that one sublime supplication, are of all prayers the simplest and the best. It was slow work to teach one who had never been taught anything, since those dim half-forgotten days when the ragamuffin child had been one among a herd of other ragamuffins in a ragged school; but Lucille was accustomed to the density of the agricultural mind, and she found an acuteness of intellect in this child of London slums and alleys which promised rapid progress in the future.

To her maid Tompion Lady Lucille intrusted the task of teaching this city waif the art of plain needlework, and the simplest household duties.

'If she really feels strong enough to get up by-and-by, you can show her how to arrange her room; and then, after she has had her dinner in the servants' hall'—Tompion's jaw fell, doubtful how even the lower house in the servants' hall would brook the introduction of this vagrant damsel—'you can teach her a little plain sewing.'

Tompion followed her mistress into the corridor.

'You don't mean to keep her at the Castle, do you, Lady Lucille,' she inquired, 'a young person without a character?'

'We shall find out what her character is in a few days.'

'Just consider, Lady Lucille, she may be mixed up with burglars! What will his lordship say?'

'That is my business, Tompion. You may be sure I shall not keep her here without his lordship's permission. I may get her a place in the neighbourhood. What you have to do is to teach her to be a handy little maid.'

'It ain't so easy to teach a tramp that has never been used to decent ways,' muttered the reluctant Tompion.

'You will find her very clever and teachable. Her wits have been sharpened in the school of adversity. This is the first time I have ever asked you to do anything out of the beaten track, Tompion. I hope you are not going to be disagreeable about it.'

Tompion vowed that she would not shrink from going through fire and water for her mistress; much less would she refuse to teach a characterless young female, whose habits no doubt were dirty, and whose language must needs be improper.

Lucille and Miss Marjorum spent a studious morning, deep in Dante's *Inferno*, the girl's eager mind leaping all grammatical fences, and seizing the spirit of the poet, the vivid dramatic power of the scene; the patient governess arresting her at every line to expatiate upon tenses and particles, relatives and predicates, with that affection for dry detail which is the favourite virtue of all mediocre teachers. The weather to-day was less distractingly lovely. The sky wore its sober English gray; and Lucille was content to stay indoors till the afternoon constitutional walk or drive which she was in the habit of taking with her governess.

Would Bruno come to-day? No, that was hardly possible. His rooms were ready; Lucille had herself been to look at them; a charming suite of rooms in the north wing, near the Earl's own quarters. Lucille had arranged the hot-house flowers on tables and mantelshelf; and her own hands had composed those still lovelier groups of field and woodland blossoms in low vases of dark dull green Venetian glass. She wanted him to be struck with the beauty of Ingleshaw, even after Italy.

After luncheon she went to see what progress Bess was making in Tompion's care. She found the damsel sitting by an open window, clothed in one of Tompion's neat cotton gowns, with her brown hair bound up in a classic knot, and set off by one of Tompion's somewhat coquettish muslin caps. Her attire was neatness itself; and the beauty, which had been striking even in dusty rags, had been made all the more brilliant by soap-and-water and clean raiment. Lucille felt proud of having picked up such a gem by the wayside.

Bess rose at the young lady's entrance, blushing and sparkling at sight of her benefactress. Tompion had been

discoursing largely on her mistress's importance, on the lofty height from which she had stooped to raise a fallen fellow-creature from the dust. The good Samaritan was an estimable person, no doubt; but he belonged to a despised race, and was perhaps a nobody. Here, on the contrary, was the daughter and heiress of an English nobleman, whose earldom dated from the Tudors, a damsel born in the purple and ermine of life, and in whose person charity must be a virtue of surpassing beauty. Bess, holding her needle clumsily, cobbled her seam industriously, and listened meekly to Tompion's holding forth. Slight as was her knowledge of any world above the wilderness of courts and back slums in which she had been bred, Bess was quite shrewd enough to know that a young lady living in such a house as Ingleshaw Castle must needs belong to the elect of this earth.

Tompion, who loved to talk, had told the waif all that could be told about Ingleshaw and its inhabitants. She told her how Mr. Challoner, her young lady's kinsman and old playfellow, was expected on a visit, after his tour in the south of Europe. The south of Europe was only a sound to Bess, whose geographical knowledge was nil; but she was keenly interested in the idea of a young man who, if he had not exactly 'kept company' with her benefactress in the past, was very likely to keep company with her in the future.

'It's pretty well known that his lordship would like them to marry,' said Tompion, with authority. 'It would keep the estates together, don't you see; for there's a good deal of property that doesn't go with the title, and that will belong to Lady Lucille by-and-by. And his lordship is very fond of Mr. Challoner.'

'Is he a good-looking young chap?' inquired Bess.

'He's a handsome fine-grown young gentleman. You mustn't call him a chap. It's a very vulgar word.'

'I knows a many that's a deal vulgarer,' said Bess. 'Lor's, if you thinks chap vulgar, I could say words as would make your hair stand on end!'

'But you must forget those horrid words. If you want Lady Lucille to be kind to you, and to take an interest in you, you must try to be genteel, like me.'

'O, you're genteel, are you?' asked the homeless one, with a mocking tone, which Miss Tompion disliked exceedingly. 'You're the pattern I'm to cut myself out upon? I'd rather look higher, and imitate Lady Lucille.'

'You're an ungrateful impertinent young woman!' exclaimed Tompion indignantly; 'and if I hadn't promised my lady, I'd wash my hands of you this instant. But Lady Lucille begged of me as a favour to teach you proper behaviour and plain sewing, and I'll do my best to oblige her.'

'I ax your pardon,' said Bess, the mischievous light in her splendid eyes softening to meekness as she spoke; 'I didn't mean to be rude. I'll do anything, or learn anything, Lady Lucille wishes; but I thought if I was to copy any one I might as well copy her.'

'That's too absurd!' exclaimed Tompion, just as Lucille entered. 'Copy her, indeed!'

Her presence seemed to fill the room with sunshine, Bess thought; and when she spoke kindly and praised her *protégée's* neat appearance, the dark eyes filled with grateful tears.

'You are ever so much better, are you not?' asked Lucille.

'Pretty nigh well, my lady; only a little weak and tottery like. I shall be all right to-morrow; and if you want me to go on to Dover, why, I can do it.'

'That depends upon what your Dover friends could do for you.'

'It won't be much, my lady,' answered the girl, with a despondent look. 'The friend I've got there is—only—a kind of a cousin, a young man as lived in the same alley. He talked of 'listing for a soldier, and I heard tell as he'd gone to Dover; but I don't know for certain as he's there.'

'You must not think of going after him,' said Lucille. 'What could he do for you, poor fellow—a soldier, without a friend in the place? You shall stop in this house till I get you a situation of some kind. And now come with me, and I'll show you the pictures. That will cheer you and amuse you, for you don't look strong enough to do much work yet. Can you walk a little?'

'Anywheres with you, Lady Lucille.'

Lucille took her through those pretty quaint old rooms, showed her the pictures and cabinets of china, which so many strangers came to see, and was infinitely amused by her curious exclamations and remarks, her utter ignorance, as of a child of three or four years old. There was much that might be taught her while she was looking at the pictures; passages of sacred history, the names of historic personages, great events in the past. Her mind was a blank; but she was eager to receive information, and showed

a keen interest in those pictured scenes, and all that Lucille could tell her about them.

Then Lucille took her in hand, and began the laborious work of revising a form of the English language which had been acquired in Whitechapel, and enriched with the copious slang of London low life—the varieties of provincial dialect picked up in that cosmopolitan city where Bess had been reared. The girl lent herself readily to this work of reformation. She had an intuitive knowledge of her own lowness, and a perfect willingness to have her speech refined and purified by her benefactress.

Finally, Lucille showed the girl her own rooms; and these seemed to Bess even more exquisite than those stately panelled and pictured apartments which were shown to tourists.

All the minute elegances of a girl's surroundings—the books and flowers, statuettes and water-coloured drawings, the piano, the high-art glass and pottery, Japanese lacquer, South Kensington tapestries—formed one brilliant whole, which dazzled and enchanted the eyes that had only seen art and luxury through the shop-windows, while standing weary and sick at heart on the muddy pavement outside. Miss Marjorum, sitting at her crewel-work frame in the recess of a window, acknowledged Bess's curtsy with the most formal bend of which her back, long trained to formality, was capable. She did not approve of this girl's introduction into the Castle; and she was longing for the Earl's return, which she anticipated would put a speedy end to Lucille's folly. She most strongly disapproved of the girl's appearance in these rooms, where her trained eyes were no doubt taking in every detail of windows and shutters, bolts and locks, for the future use of those burglars with whom Miss Marjorum, like Tompion, believed the damsel to be in association. All such wandering damsels were doubtless more or less the companions and accomplices of thieves. And then, again, the prettiness of the creature, in which even Miss Marjorum's coldly critical eye could see no flaw, was one of those objectionable features in the case which could not be reasoned away. Such a being, born and cradled in the gutter, bore in her own breast the star of an inevitable destiny.

Lucille spent an hour in displaying the glories of Ingleshaw to her *protégée*, charmed with the girl's intense appreciation of every beautiful thing which she saw; an appreciation which was not the less real because it was expressed in a language common to costermongers and their

families. To teach her a new and more refined mode of speech was the first task which Lucille set herself, and, in order to bring about this result, Bess must first learn to read; so Lucille appointed the next morning for a reading-lesson, Tompion, in the meanwhile, being charged to carry on the refining process by all means in her power.

Lucille devoted two hours after breakfast to this first reading-lesson. She found that Bess knew her letters, and had a vague glimmering of acquaintance with the easier monosyllables in the English language; but it was very much like beginning at the beginning. Lucille's patience was inexhaustible, and the pupil's intellect as keen as a razor; so a great deal was done in those two hours, more being effected by oral instruction, by the refining process of intercourse with a cultivated mind, than by the mere spelling out words upon the page of a primer.

Miss Marjorum held herself altogether aloof from this initiatory lesson. She would gladly have taken all the trouble of Bess's education on her hands had she approved Lucille's scheme; but she would not have any part in an affair which she considered to the last degree imprudent and hazardous.

'My dear, I think you know I am not one to spare my own trouble,' she said, when Lucille came to the schoolroom, having left Bess to learn the mystery of an under housemaid's work from Tompion; 'but I cannot go with you in this matter. I feel that harm will come of it.'

Lucille knew her old governess too well to attempt an argument. She stopped her dear Marjorum's mouth with Dante; and they went down to the third circle, and floundered there till luncheon.

After luncheon came rainy weather, so Marjorum retired to her room to read a dryasdust biography of a New Zealand missionary, just received from Mudie. Lucille strongly suspected that Marjorum's readings in retirement were only another name for sleep. Pleased to be alone, the girl sat down to her beloved Mozart, and lost herself in a maze of melody, in which, somehow or other, it seemed to her fancy as if Bruno was also entangled.

She had been thinking of him so much that it was hardly a surprise when the door opened softly just as she was singing 'Batti, batti,' and he came into the room.

'Don't stop!' he cried, as she rose from the piano; 'go on, Lucie. It is like hearing you talk to me. How are you, dear?' he asked, coming over to her and seating himself at

her side; and then in a rich baritone he took up the pleading tender melody. 'O Lucie, if you knew how glad I am to be home again!' he said at the end of the phrase.

'Glad to come back from Italy, the country every one sighs to visit!' she exclaimed, her face radiant with delight. 'I was afraid you would despise Ingleshaw, after all the lovely places you have seen.'

'The places I have seen are passing lovely; but there's not one of them to compare with the gray towers and green woods of Ingleshaw, in my mind, Lucie. Of course you expected me after my telegram?'

'I have been expecting you every moment, though I suppose it was a physical impossibility that you could come before now?'

'Well, yes, unless I had come in a balloon. They tell me his lordship is in London.'

'Yes; there was some important division; but he will be home in a day or two, I hope.'

'And in the meantime I am your guest.'

'Yes, and I am forgetting my duties as a hostess. You must be hungry or thirsty, after your journey. Let me order luncheon for you.'

'No, dear. I lunched at the Charing Cross Hotel. I have no such low wants as meat or drink. I want to look at you, to talk to you, to see what change the last two years have made in you.'

'Do you find me very much altered?' asked Lucille, her eyelids drooping under the ardent admiration of his gaze.

'Not altered. The bud does not alter when it blossoms into the rose. My bud has blossomed, that is all. And you are not to make your *début* this season, Lucie? I am so glad of that.'

'Why, Bruno?'

'Because I shall have you all to myself. You and I will drain the cup of bliss as it is brewed at Ingleshaw. We will be children again. We will picnic, we will light fires and boil tea-kettles, we'll revel in blackberry-hunting, nutting, mushroom gathering. I have half a mind to resume the manufacture of daisy-chains. It is almost exciting, for the stalks are so liable to give way at critical moments.'

'My father says you are to go into Parliament, and become a great politician.'

'Of course! I know I am an embryo Canning; but I mean to enjoy the embryo stage as long as I can. You shall help me. We'll read blue-books together. Hansard is in-

tensely interesting to right-minded people whose brains are not soddened by novels and poetry.'

'I should be so proud if I could help you.'

'If you could? You can; you shall. You shall by my Egeria; and between us we will do as much good for England as Numa did for Rome.'

'Ah, Bruno, if you can find some good way of helping the poor, how proud I shall be of your political career!' said Lucille, thinking of that weed from the waste of Whitechapel which she was eager to cultivate into a flower. 'There is a poor girl in this house—a creature whom I found in the plantation almost dying—and she has opened my eyes to the sad state of things among the London poor.'

'Ah, my dearest child, that is an old canker. Heaven knows how legislation is to find a cure for it! The favourite panacea of the present day is education; perhaps the coming idea may be food. When we have failed in the cultivation of sound minds in half-starved bodies, we may try again, and begin at the other end. And so you rescued some poor dying girl, and brought her home to your own house? That sounds quixotic.'

'O Bruno, if we were all a little more like Don Quixote, the world might be better than it is.'

'True, dearest; the sweetest natures are those of the people who are oftenest taken in.'

'Would you like to see her?'

'Her? Who?' asked Bruno vaguely, his eyes dwelling on the fair young face in which every beauty had developed within the period of his absence.

Not easy were it to imagine a fairer picture than these two sitting side by side in the calm afternoon light—the young man tall, broad-shouldered, with dark complexion and strongly-marked countenance, eyes of that sombre brown which seems the natural hue of thought, but just now with a smile of much sweetness lighting up his face; Lucille, delicately fair, with eyes of limpid blue, and exquisitely chiselled features, a thoroughly patrician beauty—the two looking at each other with such happy trustfulness, two souls that were not afraid of betraying their perfect union.

'My poor girl,' answered Lucille. 'Her name is Bess; she has not told me her surname. I am doubtful if she has ever known one, and I don't like to ask her awkward questions.'

'Don Quixote is nowhere in the scale of chivalry, compared with you,' said Bruno, smiling at her.

'Would you like to see her?'

'Not the faintest objection. I don't mind looking on at a procession of surnameless damsels, so long as you stay and look on with me.'

'I want you to see her, for I know you are a judge of character. Dear old Marjorum has been so disagreeable about her—calls me imprudent for giving her shelter; vows that harm will come of it; and both she and Tompion talk about burglars, just as if all poor people were thieves.'

'I'm afraid I should justify that idea if I were houseless and starving. I should make my poor little effort towards bringing about universal equality in the financial line. *La propriéte c'est le vol.* And so dear old Marjorum thinks you have picked up a she-burglar, and trembles for the safety of the family plate?'

'She is so dreadfully prejudiced,' said Lucille, ringing the bell.

She told the tall and powdered youth who attended that the young person in Tompion's charge was to bring in the afternoon tea. This was Tompion's special duty, her young mistress preferring the ministration of her own maid at this unceremonious meal to the statelier attendance of butler or footman; and Tompion bristled with indignation on receiving the powdered youth's message. But she dared not disobey.

Bruno had forgotten the existence of his cousin's *portégée* before the tea was brought; he had so much to say to Lucille after their long separation, so much to tell her, so many questions to ask.

'You must have enjoyed yourself immensely,' said Lucille, listening open-eyed to a rapid account of rambles from Rome to Madrid; from Dresden to Odessa; a bewildering confusion of catacombs, Escurial, royal picture-galleries, Tyrolese mountain and woodland, Danube, Prado, Norwegian fisheries, Roman Carnival. 'You seem to have seen everything; but I think you must have travelled rather in the style of those American tourists one reads about. Confess, now, that you scampered,' said Lucille.

'If I did, it was that I might come home to you all the sooner,' replied Bruno.

The door was thrown open by the powdered youth, with that grand air which distinguishes the thoroughbred footman from the promoted knife-boy. With the same broad dignity of action the tall youth brought forward a Chippendale tea-table, and unfolded its inlaid leaves before his

mistress, just in time to receive the circular Japanese tea-tray which Bess, shy, and with downcast eyelids, carried into the room.

Bruno looked up at her, first with a kindly interest, and then with undisguised admiration. Perhaps in all his life he had never seen such perfect beauty—not in marble or on canvas in all those art-galleries where he had feasted upon ideal beauty to satiety during the last two years. The face was not more perfect, perhaps, than those idealised models of the old painters and sculptors; only it was alive: a living, radiant, vivid beauty, blushing, tremulous, with the shy sweet sense of its own power.

For a novice in the ways of civilisation, Bess performed the duties of her situation admirably. A clever girl, whose wits have been sharpened by semi-starvation, can learn anything which is a mere matter of eye and hand. Bess handed the porcelain cups and silver cream-ewer as deftly as if she had been handling porcelain and silver all her life. There was no uncouthness in her movements. Lucille detained her as long as she reasonably could, anxious that Bruno should have leisure for observation. They talked only of the lightest topics while she waited upon them; and that light airy talk seemed to Bess like a new language. Every word, every intonation, was different from the words and tones to which she had been accustomed. To her ear, naturally delicate, that refined speech had almost the charm of music. She drank in every tone; and as she looked at Bruno Challoner, mentally comparing that tall strong frame, those finely-cut definite features, and the dark thoughtful eyes, with the wizened stunted undergrowth, or burly and bloated overgrowth, of the companions of her youth, the crafty mouth, the ferret eyes, this man appeared to her as a grand and godlike creature, the inhabitant of an unknown world.

'Now for your opinion,' said Lucille eagerly, when Bess had left the room with the tea-tray. 'Do you think I have done a very dreadful thing in befriending that poor creature?'

'Indeed no, dear. I don't see any sign of the burglarious temperament,' answered Bruno, smiling at his cousin's earnest face; 'but at the same time it may be rather difficult to know what to do with your *protégée*. We must ask his lordship's advice. I don't think you ought to keep her in the Castle, since you know nothing whatever of her antecedents; and, after all, the Ingleshaw plate-room, or even your own jewel-cases, might be a temptation.'

'O Bruno, when you have just seen her sweet innocent face!'

'Not to her perhaps, but to her friends,' said Bruno, apologetically. 'No young woman can grow up, in any sphere of life, without having friends, don't you know. Perhaps the best thing you could do for this girl would be to apprentice her to some country dressmaker—at Sevenoaks or Tunbridge, for instance; and if she behave well during her apprenticeship you might get one of your friends to engage her as a lady's maid. I should think that must be better than being a journeywoman dressmaker.'

'What I should like to do is to keep her in the Castle. She could help Tompion in some light kind of work. This morning I began to teach her to read; she is horribly ignorant, but so bright and quick that it is a pleasure to teach her.'

'That would be all very well if you knew her antecedents; but, as you don't—'

'I have not asked her any questions about her past life; she was so weak and ill when I brought her home. I want her to feel assured of my kindness before I question her.'

'And when you do she may favour you with one of those romances which people in her position are quite capable of inventing. I don't want to dishearten you, dear, in your effort to do a good work: but this is a matter in which I think you ought to be ruled by your father's wisdom and experience.'

'Then I'm sure I shall have my own way,' said Lucille, with a radiant smile. 'My father never denies me anything.'

After this they talked of themselves, and Bess was forgotten. Miss Marjorum came in presently—the Maori missionary having proved peculiarly interesting this gray drowsy afternoon—and was intensely surprised to find Bruno established in the morning-room. They dined together; and after dinner Bruno and Lucille went for a moonlight ramble in the park; a ramble about which Miss Marjorum had some qualms of conscience, lest it might be considered a breach of that severe etiquette to which her soul inclined. Two years ago the cousins had wandered together at their own will; for in those days Lucille was counted as a child; but now Lucille was a woman, and the line must be drawn somewhere. Ought it not to be drawn at moonlit rambles? Happily the Earl would be home to-morrow; and this delicate question might be submitted to him.

Lord Ingleshaw did not return next day. A letter came for Lucille, telling her that the debate in the Lords had been adjourned, and that he would have to stay in Grosvenor Square a few days longer, so as to be ready with his vote. Lucille was to take care of Bruno, and to keep him at the Castle till her father's return.

Lucille found no difficulty in obeying these instructions. Bruno found the summer days only too short in his cousin's company. Poor Miss Marjorum, always bent upon adhering as nearly as she could to her own severe code of etiquette, drove and walked with them in the broiling sun and the treacherous wind until her nose was blistered in the service. But Marjorum's presence was to them as if it had not been. They were as loving as Romeo and Juliet under her very nose; and there were times when, in these long rustic rambles, Marjorum was fain to sit down on some green bank by the wayside, sheltered by overhanging hawthorn and blackberry, while Bruno and Lucille had the world all to themselves.

In one of these brief excursions into Paradise the young man caught his cousin suddenly in his arms, among the dancing lights and flickering shadows, under the luminous green of young beech leaves, and held the fair young face upon his breast while he bent to kiss those innocent lips, pleading for the right to call his dearest by a nearer and dearer name than cousin—calling her in advance, in the rapture of that passionate moment, bride and wife.

'Shall it not be so, love? It is the dream of my life!' he said.

'And of mine,' she answered.

Then, after a brief pause, in which they stood silent, lost in a happy dreamland, she said,

'Will my father be angry, Bruno, do you think? I would sooner die than disobey him.'

'Dearest, I have some reason to believe your father will be glad.'

'Then all the world is full of happiness,' said Lucille; and then, clasping her lover's arm with a sudden impulse, she exclaimed, 'O Bruno, let us be kind to the poor! God has been so good to us—so good! And when I think how many unhappy people there are in the world, while—'

'While our lives are steeped in bliss. Yes, it does seem hard, does it not, Lucie? "There's something in this world amiss, shall be unriddled by-and-by." That "by-and-by" must seem such a long way off to those who suffer keenly to-day.'

They went back to the lane where Miss Marjorum was nodding in a placid after-luncheon nap under the shelter of blackberry and hawthorn. They both look so radiant that the spinster's keen eye divined something out of the common.

'Why, what mischief have you two been plotting?' she asked.

'Only to set village bells ringing before the blackberries are ripe,' said Bruno, laughing. 'Marjy, you will have to give me a wedding-present. Please don't let it be a Bible or a Church-service, for I am handsomely provided with both.'

CHAPTER III.

FROM SUNSHINE TO GLOOM.

'Who hath not felt that breath in the air,
A perfume and freshness strange and rare,
A warmth in the light, and a bliss everywhere,
When young hearts yearn together?'

For three days of unbroken unspeakable bliss the lovers dreamed their fond and happy dream. There was not a cloudlet on the brightness of their sky. The very weather seemed made on purpose for them. Never had the chase, or the plantations, the rustic Kentish villages with their quaint old-world air, the ruined abbey with its neatly-kept gardens, and trim mansion-house hard by, the lanes, the meadows, the river—never had that fair English scenery, amidst which Lucille had been born and bred, worn a lovelier aspect. She and Bruno walked and rode and drove and idled about all through the summery days. Except for that one hour which she devoted every morning to the patient instruction of Bess, Lucille's time was entirely absorbed by her lover. Miss Marjorum felt that the bow must be relaxed a little in favour of lovers newly engaged. She was hourly expecting the Earl's return; and then things would fall into a more orderly course.

On the third evening after that exchange of vows in the little wood at the end of the blackberry lane, Lucille sat at her piano, with her lover by her side. She was silent, softly playing a plaintive reverie by Gounod: and it seemed to Bruno that for the last half-hour a strange seriousness had overshadowed her. He could hardly see her face in the light of the low-shaded lamp, but he could see that she was very pale.

'I am afraid you are tired, Lucille,' he said.

'Rather tired. Perhaps we rode a little too far this afternoon.'

'Not so far as yesterday, sweet.'

'It must have been warmer to-day, then. I feel ever so much more tired. I have a slight sore throat. Don't look alarmed, Bruno; it will be well to-morrow, I have no doubt.

'Are you subject to sore throat?'

'No, I don't remember having had one for ages.'

Bruno got up and rang the bell. Miss Marjorum was writing letters at a distant table. She kept up tremendous correspondences with the friends of her youth chiefly of the governess profession—and had a vague but comfortable idea that her letters would be published after her death, and would rank with the compositions of Mrs. Carter.

Bruno stopped to say a few words to her on his way to the piano. He begged her to send instantly for the family doctor. He had come from Italy, the land of fever, and was quick to take alarm at the faintest symptom of mischief.

He went back to his seat by Lucille. The girl had been playing all the time, dwelling with a lingering *legato* touch upon the tender dreamy music.

'Is there anything wrong?' she asked, seeing her old governess confabulating in a somewhat mysterious way with the footman who answered the bell.

'No, dear; but I know you are more tired than you confess, and I want you to go to bed very early and nurse that sore throat. O, by-the-bye, talking of your *protégée*'—of whom they had not been talking—'was there anything the matter with her when you found her in the plantation? I mean, anything beyond weakness and hunger? Was she in a fever?'

'O no,' answered Lucille; 'she had been laid up with a fever at the Union, and she was discharged as cured; but having no money and no friends, she wandered about in a starving condition till she fell helpless by the wayside.'

'I see. She had had a fever, and had been cured and discharged,' said Bruno, with a terrible sinking at his heart.

He went back to Miss Marjorum, who had laid aside her letter, in the middle of a Johnsonian paragraph, and closed her desk, and who looked the image of trouble. He urged her to get Lucille to her room as soon as possible, but on no account to alarm her. But Lucille's quick mind had divined her lover's fears.

She rose from the piano, shivering and faint, and with an inward conviction that she was going to be ill—she whose brief happy life had been almost free from malady. She went over to Bruno and laid her hand gently on his shoulder, and drew him into the recess of the window, beyond Miss Marjorum's hearing.

'If I should have caught a fever from that poor thing,

don't let her be sent away while I am ill,' she pleaded earnestly.

'My dearest, it will not be in my power—' he began.

'It is the first favour I have asked you since our engagement, Bruno. Promise,' she urged.

'I promise, love. I will do my uttermost to prevent her being sent away.'

'It is not her fault, remember, dear. She did not know that the fever was contagious. She had been told that she was cured.'

'Of course, dear. And who says you are going to have a fever?' said Bruno, pretending to be intensely cheerful. 'You are only a little tired with our rides and rambles in the sunshine. If you go to bed early, and let Marjorum nurse you, I daresay you will be quite well to-morrow morning.'

But Lucille was no better next morning—a great deal worse, rather; and on his early visit, before nine o'clock, the family doctor pronounced her indisposition a clearly marked case of scarlet fever. He saw Bess, and discovered that she was only just escaping from the most contagious condition of a convalescent patient, and that, when Lady Lucille took her home to the Castle, that dangerous condition must have been in full force. Tompion and Miss Marjorum had both had scarlet fever; but the carefully guarded Lucille had escaped the disease hitherto, and was a ready subject for contagion.

When Bess heard what had happened she was in an agony of grief. Mr. Wharton, the kind-hearted doctor, was constrained to comfort her by the assurance that at present there was no indication of danger.

'But at the same time,' said Miss Marjorum severely, 'I must say it was a very cruel act of you to come into this house, and bring trouble and sickness with you.'

'I had better go away this minute,' said Bess, drying her tears, and drawing herself up with more dignity of gesture than might be expected of a girl who had sold violets for a penny a bunch; 'but you may bear in mind, lady, that I was brought into this house by that sweet angel when I hardly knew whether I was alive or dead, and that it was by her wish I stopped here. As to bringing sickness and trouble—well, what should such as I bring with me but trouble, that has never knowed anything else? But I'll go this moment. I can go on the tramp again, and fall back into all the old ways; but I can never forget the dear young lady that's ill. She was the first lady that ever treated

me as if I was made of the same flesh and blood as herself.'

'No, you are not to go away,' said Bruno firmly. 'It was Lady Lucille's special request to me that you should not be sent away while she was ill. Tompion, you will look after this young person during your mistress's illness, and you will see that she learns to make herself useful.'

Bess looked at Mr. Challoner with wide-open wondering eyes. It was the first time this godlike personage had spoken directly to her. His voice thrilled her; his eyes, with their steady divinely truthful look, awed her into silence. She stood before him as before a supernaturally gifted judge, who could read her secret thoughts.

'Yes,' muttered Tompion, as Mr. Challoner left the room; 'and she will go about the house giving other people fevers, I'll warrant! I don't know but what I've got the fever upon me myself. There's a many that have it twice.'

'You needn't be afraid,' said Mr. Wharton. 'I'll take care that there shall be no risk of further infection, if this young person will do what I tell her.'

'I'll do anything, sir,' answered Bess meekly, her eyes still fixed on the doorway through which Bruno had gone. 'I'd give half my life if they'd let me nurse that dear young lady.'

'Why, what can you know of nursing, young woman?' asked the doctor.

'Poor folks has to help one another, sir,' answered the girl meekly. 'Many's the night I've sat up to nurse a neighbour, or a neighbour's child. We all lived so scrooged together down our court, one couldn't help being friendly.'

'Yes, I know how good the poor are to the poor,' said the doctor kindly. 'Well, Mr. Challoner says you are to stay. We'll see, by-and-by, if you can be handy in the sick-room; but we must have better help than yours. I have telegraphed for a couple of nurses from an institution in London.'

And now came all those dismal signs and tokens of an infectious illness which send a chill to the hearts of those who can only watch and wait for the result. Lady Lucille's rooms were cut off from all direct communication with the rest of the house. Sheets steeped in diluted carbolic acid hung before the doors. A nursing sister, in a prim black gown and a picturesque white cap, emerged solemnly at intervals to receive the various necessaries for the sick-room. Bruno was forbidden all access to his cousin's apartment, albeit he had no fear of infection. Miss Marjorum had

suffered the malady in her infancy, and had an idea that the lapse of time had prepared her for a second attack; so, although deeply anxious about her pupil, she readily submitted to the decree of banishment.

To Bruno banishment seemed almost as hard to bear as it was to Romeo in the morning of his love. It was so hard to be parted from his betrothed in the very beginning of their engagement; to be so near her, and yet to be forbidden to see her, to clasp the dear hand, to whisper tender words of comfort and pity; hardest of all to know that while he walked about and chafed and fretted, in all the fulness of health and vigour, she lay prostrate and suffering, consumed with fever, the lips he kissed yesterday parched and pale, the sweet eyes dull and heavy.

He spent the greater part of the day pacing the garden-paths below Lady Lucille's rooms, looking up at the open windows, longing to hear his darling's voice, going into the house every half-hour to get the latest news of the sick-room. She was very ill, they told him, suffering a good deal from sore throat; but this was only natural. The disease must take its course.

The same train which brought the two nursing sisters brought Lord Ingleshaw, summoned by a telegram from Miss Marjorum. He had arranged to arrive at Ingleshaw on this day, and had looked forward to a joyful meeting with Bruno, who had written to tell him how Lucille and he only waited her father's approval of their engagement to make them completely happy. Bruno knew very well that to ask his kinsman's consent was only a respectful formula; enough had been said by the Earl in the past to assure him that Lord Ingleshaw had no dearer hope than to see his daughter married to her cousin.

But now, instead of meeting in joy, the Earl and his heir met in sorrow. True that the family doctor declared that the malady showed no sign of danger; that there was not even occasion for a second opinion. The fact that the bright happy girl lay prostrate and fever-stricken was full of pain and fear for those who so fondly loved her.

'How, in Heaven's name, can she have caught this fever?' asked the Earl, looking from Bruno to Miss Marjorum. 'Where has she been? What has she been doing? Is there scarlet fever in the village? Has she been visiting any sick people?'

'I regret to say that the dear child's wilfulness is the sole cause of this misfortune,' said Miss Marjorum; and then

she proceeded to tell the story of Lucille's unconscious imitation of the good Samaritan.

The Earl was a Christian, deeply and earnestly religious; yet his first thought, on hearing the story, was that his daughter had acted like a fool. There is such a wide distance between mechanical benevolence—as shown in liberal contributions to all respectable charities, in large doles of bread and fuel dealt out by hireling hands—and in this personal practical compassion, which brings a patrician's daughter face to face with the child of the gutter.

Lord Ingleshaw's second thought was vindictive towards Bess.

'What has become of this girl? She has been sent away, of course?' he said.

'I regret to say that she has not,' replied Miss Marjorum, with a crushing look at Bruno.

'Lucille earnestly entreated me last night that the young woman should not be sent away,' said Bruno, unabashed. 'I promised her that if it were in my power to prevent it she should not be sent away. She can do no further harm by remaining here.'

'She can only rob the house, and murder us all in our beds,' said Miss Marjorum.

'His lordship can see her, and judge for himself what inclination she may have that way,' replied Bruno.

'I'll see my daughter first,' said Lord Ingleshaw.

'My dear sir, consider: at your age scarlet fever might be fatal,' exclaimed Miss Marjorum.

'I believe I have had scarlet fever. At any rate I have no fear of infection,' answered the Earl.

'They won't let me see her,' said Bruno piteously. 'How I wish I might go with you!'

Unhappily, Mr. Wharton had expressly ordered that his patient was to be kept as quiet as possible, and was to see no one but her nurses. The father's authority overruled the doctor's; but there could be no such exception made in Bruno's favour. He had to content himself with pouring out his love and devotion in a hurried letter, which the Earl promised to give to Lucille.

Lord Ingleshaw stayed with his darling for about ten minutes, the day nurse looking grudgingly on at his caresses, as if he were poisoning her patient. Lucille was feeble and feverish, but her eyes brimmed over with joyful tears at sight of the dear father. She put her arms round his neck and hugged him, as he bent over her pillow.

'I'm afraid this is very agitating for her,' murmured the nurse.

'No, no, indeed, father; don't go away yet. It does me a world of good to see you.'

Before Lord Ingleshaw left her bedside he had promised that Bess should not be sent away. The mischief that was done could not be undone; and he could not steel himself against his sick child's tender pleading.

He sent for Bess, and saw her alone in the library; the girl deeply awed by the grave yet splendid aspect of the room—the walls of books, the carved oak cabinets, the massive writing-table, before which the Earl sat in his large crimson morocco-covered armchair, an imposing figure, with fine intellectual face, and silvered hair and beard.

He questioned her closely, as it would never have occurred to Lady Lucille to question her: and this was the utmost he could obtain from her.

She could remember neither father nor mother. She had been brought up by an old woman, who went hawking in town and country, sometimes selling one kind of goods, sometimes another—flowers and fruit mostly in London, lace and haberdashery in the country. The woman treated her badly, beat her, and half-starved her, and as soon as she was old enough she ran away, and sold flowers on her own account, sharing a garret in Whitechapel with three other girls, two of them match-box makers, and the third a hawker like herself. It was a hard life; but they got along somehow, till she fell ill of a fever, and they took her to the infirmary attached to the workhouse. When she recovered the workhouse authorities turned her out; and instead of going back to her garret she set out to walk to Dover, where she hoped to find a young man who had kept company with her, and who had 'listed, and gone with his regiment to that place.

Lord Ingleshaw made particular inquiries as to her relations with this young man. He had been employed at a horse-dealer's in Whitechapel. He was an honest lad; had never got into trouble, so far as she knew. He wanted to marry her as soon as he had saved a little money; but in the meanwhile he had quarrelled with his master, and enlisted in a cavalry regiment. The girl answered his lordship's questions without flinching. He could see no sign of guilt in her manner. The story of her youth and bringing up was wretched, but as common as it was wretched. She declared that she had never been in prison; she had managed to exist by honest labour, such as it was.

She had no knowledge of any other name than Bess. The old woman had called her by that name. Her young man had called her Starlight Bess, after a character in a play.

'We will give you a surname at once,' said the Earl. 'My daughter found you on a May morning. Suppose we call you Elizabeth May? I shall allow you to remain at the Castle in Tompion's charge for the present; and I hope you will take pains to learn all she can teach you. By-and-by I will see what can be done to place you in the way of earning your living. You must forget all about the young man at Dover. He is a soldier, and will have to go wherever his regiment may be ordered. You had better tell me his name, by-the-bye.'

'Tom Brook.'

The Earl wrote the name in his pocket-book.

'And you must promise me that you will hold no communication with him while you are in this house.'

'I can't write,' said the girl simply.

'Very good. But you must understand that you are not to communicate with Mr. Brook by any other means. And now you can go.'

The girl, no longer Bess, but Elizabeth May, lifted her soft eyes gratefully to the Earl's face, made him a curtsy, and retired.

'She is the prettiest creature I ever saw,' mused his lordship; 'and she has the air of a lady, in spite of her vile English. This must be some waif from the superior classes that has drifted into the gutter.'

CHAPTER IV.

OVER SUMMER SEAS.

'And ever as we sailed, our minds were full
Of love and wisdom, which would overflow
In converse wild, and sweet, and wonderful;
And in quick smiles whose light would come and go,
Like music o'er wide waves.'

MIDSUMMER-DAY had come and gone, and June was nearly over, before Lady Lucille was so far convalescent as to sit in an armchair by the open window of her dressing-room, and take afternoon tea with her father. The fever had been worse than Mr. Wharton apprehended. A famous physician had been down from London four times, merely to approve Mr. Wharton's treatment. Nurses and doctor had watched with unwavering care; and now the peril was past and gone, and Lady Lucille, pale, wan, and ethereal, reclined luxuriously in a nest of downy pillows, and sipped her tea, while her father watched her with eyes that were dimmed by happy tears. There had been a time—one terrible never-to-be-forgotten night—when he feared to lose this one jewel of his home.

Lady Lucille had had three nurses instead of two. Elizabeth May had pleaded with the doctor to be admitted to the sick-room, as a mere drudge to wait upon the trained nurses; and she had proved herself a genius at nursing.

'I believe she has a genius for everything,' said Lucille, looking up at the girl who stood beside her chair, ready to take the cup and saucer, which were almost too heavy a burden for the weak wasted hands. 'Now that I am so much better, we can go on with our reading-lessons, Elizabeth.'

'I shall be so glad of that, Lady Lucille. I have been learning with Tompion every day; and I've read to myself at night when I've been wakeful; and I think I've got on. But it will be so much nicer to learn with you.'

'She has left off using vulgar expressions,' said Lord Ingleshaw approvingly. 'She reads her Bible daily, and she has been to church with Tompion. I think she is getting clearer ideas of what Christianity means.'

Elizabeth looked at him gratefully with those gazelle eyes of hers. He, too, like Bruno Challoner, was one of the demi-gods, judged by that standard of humanity which was alone familiar to her. She looked with reverent admiration at the straight clearly-cut features, the thick gray hair brushed smoothly back from the broad open brow, the commanding gaze of the gray eyes, under strongly marked brows, darker than the hair. Among all her companions of the past there had been no such face as this.

Bruno Challoner was in London. Lord Ingleshaw, seeing that he was fretting himself into a fever, had insisted upon his leaving the Castle directly Lucille was pronounced out of danger.

'I'll send you half a dozen telegrams a day, if you like,' said his lordship; 'but I won't have you hanging about the corridors to question the nurses, or pacing the terrace, under Lucille's windows, half the night.'

During the first fortnight of his betrothed's illness, Bruno had been in frequent communication with Elizabeth, who was, indeed, his chief informant about his darling's condition. She seemed more sympathetic than the hired nurses. She brought him messages from his love, and carried back his own loving messages and the flowers which he had gathered to adorn his darling's room. She was full of intelligence, divining his every thought, as it seemed to Bruno, with that wonderful keenness bred of stern necessity. Her devotion to the young lady, whose charity had opened the gates of a new world for her, was obvious in all her conduct.

'I believe that for once in my life I have met with the black swan, gratitude,' Bruno told himself.

And now Bruno was getting rid of his life, as best he might, an exile from Ingleshaw. He slept at the house in Grosvenor Square, dined at his club, spent his days in masculine society, talked politics with incipient Cabinet Ministers flushed with the small triumphs of their first session, and planned his own entrance into public life. He had no heart for the amusements of London, while Lucille was still an invalid. His spirits rose and fell in unison with the telegrams from the Castle. He would accept no invitation, and go to neither opera nor theatre. His only evening resort was the Strangers' Gallery or the Lobby in the House of Commons, where he combined instruction with amusement. Never did three weeks of his life hang more heavily on his hands.

She, who little more than a month ago had been Wild Bess, Black-eyed Bess, of Whitechapel, but who now answered meekly to the name of Elizabeth, had ample occupation for her mind during this glowing summer-tide. Her introduction to Ingleshaw Castle had been like a new birth. Pygmalion's animated statue could hardly have begun life more newly than this girl, suddenly transferred from the slums to the palace. Her eyes shone wide with wonder at a world where all things, animate and inanimate, were strange and beautiful. She had an intense appreciation of the Beautiful which surprised Lucille, who had been taught by the severely Aristotelean Marjorum that taste was the product of education, and was not to be expected from the ignorant.

Even Miss Marjorum was forced to admit that Elizabeth May showed a wonderful quickness at acquiring knowledge; but while owning as much as this, Lucille's governess in nowise sank her prejudice against her pupil's *protégée*. She would have disliked Elizabeth less had she been dull and slow. There was, to her mind, something uncanny, something impish, in this excessive quickness, this marvellous adaptability. That a creature plucked out of the quagmire of destitute dissolute East-end London could acquire all at once the graciousness of a lady, the low and musical tones of voice, the quiet measured movements, the tranquil beauty of educated girlhood—ay, of girlhood taught and trained through the slow course of years by Miss Marjorum—was a miracle that troubled and vexed the governess exceedingly. Of course this refinement was all surface—mere acting at best—a remarkable instance of mimetic power in the lower classes. Unfortunately, the Earl and his daughter were too ready to be deceived by these mimic graces. Already this characterless, creditless damsel was accepted as a member of the Ingleshaw household, and sat at meat with the upper servants, or was served apart in her own bower—she who should have been proud to eat with kitchen-maids and footmen. There was no more talk of apprenticing her, or finding her service elsewhere. She was to learn the duties of an abigail from Tompion, and on Tompion's marriage with the under-butler—an event which had been impending for the last five years—Elizabeth May was to take Tompion's place. In the meantime there were small and gracious duties allotted to her. She dusted the books and china in Lady Lucille's rooms; she arranged the flowers, handling with light and delicate touch those exquisite exotics which

were to her verily the revelation of unknown worlds. Lucille often made these flowers the text for a brief lecture on the countries from which they came, Elizabeth listening delightedly to the description of those far-away tropical regions.

During those quiet days of Lucille's convalescence, the girl whom she had rescued from ignorance and destitution was almost always in her company. It was in vain that Miss Marjorum prophesied dismally upon the evil consequences of this familiarity. The girl behaved so well that it was difficult to object to her presence. She was so eager to learn, that it would have seemed in the last degree illiberal to withhold knowledge. And it was the higher order of knowledge for which this virgin mind thirsted. When Lucille read passages of Milton or Shakespeare, Elizabeth listened enthralled. That story of Hamlet—that passionate tragedy of Romeo and Juliet—how deep was the magic of these to the listener, whose imagination, for the first time, beheld that awful picture of Hamlet and the Ghost, or glowed with delight at the image of Juliet bending from her balcony to whisper to her lover in the sweet silence of the Italian midnight! To be eighteen, intelligent, of an impassioned temperament, and to hear those stories for the first time! What could surpass that rapture? To hear them, seated in an Italian garden, steeped in the perfume of countless roses, warmed to the very heart's core by the sunshine of July! And a few weeks ago this girl had lived in a loathsome alley, polluted with unspeakable foulness, clamorous with rough riot and vilest speech.

Against these Shakesperean studies, this introduction of the gutter-bred girl to the sublimest heights of imaginative literature, Miss Marjorum protested vehemently.

'What do you mean to make of her?' she asked. 'Don't you see that you are spoiling her for domestic service by trying to give her these elevated tastes?'

'I am not trying,' answered Lucille. 'Elevated taste is as natural to her as his song is to the thrush. Can't you see that God created her full of imagination and cleverness, and that she has only been waiting the opportunity of development? She need not spend her life in domestic service. She takes so kindly to education that I shall teach her all I can; and I know you will help me, dear Marjy, and by-and-by we shall find plenty of use for her intelligence. If you will only take her in hand, she may some day earn her living by teaching others, as honourably as you have done for the last twenty years.'

This argument was unanswerable, and the softened Marjorum replied gently.

'You forget, my dear, that it is not every one who has the teacher's capacity. The power to impart information is a peculiar gift. This girl may be quick in picking up ideas, in a superficial sort of way; but I doubt if she possesses any of the solid qualities which go to make a competent instructress of youth.'

'Only try your hand upon her, Marjy dear. I'm sure you could make something out of a black girl from Otaheite.'

Marjorum, thus flattered and caressed into compliance by the pupil whom she fondly loved, and in whose married home she hoped by-and-by to make her nest, allowed her prejudices to be lulled to sleep. She took Elizabeth in hand, and put her through a severe educational process for a space of three hours daily; and once having put her hand to the plough, Miss Marjorum drove her furrow vigorously. She was glad to have an occasion for the bringing forth of that educational machinery which Lucille had outgrown and done with. The equator, Lindley Murray, latitude and longitude, the sidereal heavens, the earth's formation, the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms, were all brought into play. Elizabeth laboured and learned obediently, indefatigably. It was dryasdust work; but her benefactress wished her so to learn; and she never faltered, any more than she had faltered when Tompion introduced her to the feminine art of needlework by making her sew interminable seams in the stiffest calico.

When her morning studies were over Elizabeth had her reward in an afternoon and evening given to music, art, and poetry. Her mind grew and widened under this double tuition. The knowledge of dry hard facts helped her to a higher appreciation of poetry. Never, perhaps, did education proceed so quickly.

And now Lucille was so far recovered that the doctor declared she needed only a change to sea air to become as strong and well as she had been before that fatal May morning; so Miss Marjorum was despatched to Weymouth, attended by the under-butler, to find a furnished house facing the sea; and having selected one particular house, distinguishable only by its superior freshness and purity of furniture and decoration, from a terrace of houses all exactly alike, Miss Marjorum telegraphed the accomplishment of her mission; whereupon Lord Ingleshaw himself escorted his daughter to Weymouth, attended by Tompion and Eliza-

beth May, who travelled together in a second-class carriage, an opportunity which Tompion improved by various remarks upon favourites, flatterers, and sycophants in the abstract, and of the brief tenure of favour usually enjoyed by such persons; all of which sententious utterances Elizabeth heard with the calm smile of scorn, feeling herself as much superior to Tompion as she knew herself inferior to Lady Lucille.

Lord Ingleshaw spent a few days with his daughter, who was now in such perfect health and spirits that this change of air prescribed by the doctor seemed a mere formula. They drove about the shady rustic roads, sailed on the summer sea, explored the arid heights of Portland, drank of the Wishing-well, admired the White Horse, and thoroughly enjoyed life in this calm restful fashion. And then Lord Ingleshaw departed on a visit to a friend in the North, where there was to be great slaughter of grouse a little later on.

'I daresay Bruno will be running down to have a peep at you,' he said on the morning he left Weymouth. 'I have give him permission to come.'

Lucille blushed and sparkled, and kissed her father by way of answer. She had been longing to see her lover for the last month. He had written to her daily, but she had been forbidden to answer his letters, which seemed a hard thing. He had sent her books, music, trifles of every kind calculated to beguile the tedium of illness, and she had only been allowed to thank him through that stately medium, Miss Marjorum. She had not been allowed to look at the letter which conveyed her gratitude, lest scarlet fever should be transmitted by a look.

And now he was coming, he was coming! She could have shouted for joy. Tremulous with hope and gladness, she stood on the balcony overhanging the bright picturesque bay, and looked along the parade for that gracious fly which should convey Mr. Challoner and his portmanteau from the station. The Italian band was playing *Don Giovanni* below her windows—melodies brimming over with joyous love, like that which filled her soul.

'Surely, my dear Lucille, you are going for a walk or a drive this delightful morning!' said Marjorum, coming in from the back drawing-room, where Elizabeth sat meekly writing out a page of grammatical analysis, with the laborious slowness of one to whom penmanship and grammar were new arts.

'No, Marjy dearest, not to-day. I am watching for Bruno,' answered Lucille from the balcony.

'Deh, vieni alla finestra,' played the band below, while the happy bathers splashed and bounded in the blue water beyond that crescent of yellow sand.

'But, my dear Lucille, you have no justification for expecting him this morning, or even to-day,' expostulated Miss Marjorum. 'His lordship merely stated, as a general fact, that Mr. Challoner was now at liberty to pay you a visit.'

'And do you think he will not come directly he is free?' exclaimed Lucille. 'Would I not go to him—like an arrow from a bow—if I were told I might go? I expect him this instant.'

'You will, at least, allow that he can hardly come until the train bring him, and there is none due till half-past three.'

'How horribly matter-of-fact you are!' cried Lucille. No, I suppose he would come by train. Post-horses would be slower, and balloons are so erratic. Please give me the time-table.'

She ran rapidly over that bewildering document.

'No, I can't make out anything. My brain is in a whirl. The trains seem to go everywhere except to this place. Yes, here is the column at last. Weymouth—Weymouth! No; not till half-past three. How horrible!'

'Had you not better go for a nice country drive?' suggested Miss Marjorum. 'It would divert your mind.'

'Nothing less than an earthquake would divert my mind,' retorted Lucille impatiently. 'I don't believe in your time-table. I'll go and sit on the beach, if you like; but I shall be expecting Bruno every instant. Has Elizabeth finished her lessons?'

Miss Marjorum inspected the page of analysis in the stiff newly-acquired round-hand, looking down at the exercise majestically over Elizabeth's shoulder.

'Yes, she has just finished.'

'Then she can come with me,' said Lucille, putting on her hat and gloves, and taking up a volume of Shakespeare. 'Bring your work, Lizzie, and come and sit on the beach.'

Elizabeth ran off to put on her hat, and returned in two minutes, the image of propriety, in her neat-fitting black cashmere gown, linen collar, and small black straw hat. She carried a basket containing an antimacassar, for she had already advanced from endless calico seams to high-art needlework.

The two girls tripped lightly down to the beach, away from the bathers and the children, to a spot that was almost

secluded, though the confined limits of the bay do not give much opportunity for seclusion. They found an empty boat which helped to screen them from the rest of the world, and, seated in its shadow, Lucille opened her Shakespeare.

'I am going to read to you, Lizzie. Shall it be *Romeo and Juliet?*'

'Whatever you like, Lady Lucille.'

Lucille began at the ballroom scene, the dawn of Juliet's love, and went on, skipping a scene here and there, to the balcony scene. She had nearly finished this when there came a step upon the loose pebbles of the beach, and she dropped the book suddenly, and rose to her feet.

Yes, it was Bruno. She would have known his step among a thousand. Another moment, and she was clasped to his breast, still sheltered by that friendly boat, while Elizabeth walked away discreetly, leaving the lovers to themselves for a little while. There is a universal etiquette in these things, founded upon the universality of human nature, which prevails from Mayfair to Whitechapel.

'My darling, how more than happy I am to be with you!' exclaimed Bruno. 'I never thought that I should live to consider it my greatest misfortune not to have had scarlet fever. My own one, do not think that it was my vile cowardice which parted us all this time. I had no fear of the fever. I would have watched by your pillow day and night, if I had been allowed. But I could not rebel against your father. I best proved my love of his daughter by obedience to him.'

'I know, Bruno. I have never doubted your unselfishness or your love. But it has been a long parting. I did not think it possible days and hours could seem so long,' said Lucille naïvely.

'Be assured they have not seemed longer to you than they have been to me, love. And now let us sit side by side, and you shall tell me all you have to tell. Thank God you are well again—the very image of blooming health—and lovelier than ever!'

'But how did you get here, Bruno? Marjy and I examined the time-table; there was no train due till half-past three.'

'Perhaps you only looked at one time-table. I came by the Great Western.'

'What, are there two railways? How sweet of the Great Western to bring you ever so much sooner than I hoped!'

And then they gave themselves up to lovers' talk, which

must seem mere drivel, sheer imbecility, if set down formally in black and white, but which was full of deepest meaning for these two. They sat under the hull of the big lubberly fishing-boat, and told each other all they had thought, and felt, and suffered during the weary time of severance.

Elizabeth strolled upon the beach a little way off, within call, should she be wanted. She looked back now and then at those two figures under the boat, but they gave no indication of wanting her, though she had been strolling up and down that stretch of sand and pebble for one slow sunny hour. For the first time since she had been at Weymouth she felt inexpressibly lonely; for the first time since she had seen the place, the beauty of that southern bay, shut in from the outer world by green headlands on one side and by Portland's bold peninsula on the other, began to pall upon her. In a moment, as it were, her soul grew weary of blue sea and yellow sands, summer sky, undulating green hills, and all the glory and freshness of the summer day. What was it all to her, or to any lonely uncared-for creature, more than a picture on a wall—a thing in which she had no part?

'Better to be in Ramshackle Court, where I had plenty of people of my own kind to talk to,' she thought sullenly, when the second hour had begun, and the lovers still sat, absorbed, their heads bent towards each other, like flowers inclining on their stems. An hour ago she had been Lucille's companion, and life had seemed full of interest. Now she was Lucille's servant, a being quite remote from the young lady's existence.

Nature had given this child of the gutter warm feelings — some good, some bad. Among the latter was jealousy, of which she had more than the common share. She almost hated Bruno for having banished her from Lady Lucille's company. Yes, even Bruno, that demi-god, whose voice had tones which moved her almost to tears—whose eyes had glances that made her shrink and tremble.

Better to be among her own people, amidst filth and squalor, evil ways and evil language? No, that was a lunatic's impulse. Could she, who had escaped from that pandemonium into the paradise of refinement and clean living, calmly contemplate the possibility of being flung back into that gulf of horror? No; a thousand times no. And yet, without sympathy, without the company of some one she loved and admired, the placid luxury of her present life was hateful to her. She had grown fastidious in this

new atmosphere. Food and raiment, air and sunshine, comfort and shelter, were no longer all-sufficient for her. Heretofore in a life of perpetual want and difficulty the cravings of physical nature had been paramount. Now the spiritual nature predominated. The sharper pangs of heart-hunger had begun.

At last, when she had grown as weary of that smiling summer scene as ever she had felt of those wet windy streets, along which she had toiled, drabbled and muddy, with her basket of sickly flowers, in the days of her slavery, Lucille and her lover rose and walked slowly across the sands towards that lonely figure.

'We are going home, Elizabeth,' said the lady. 'It must be nearly time for luncheon.'

'Nearly!' exclaimed Bess. 'It is half-past two. I heard the clock strike ever so long ago.'

'Poor thing, why did you wait for me? I daresay you have been longing to go to your dinner,' said Lucille compassionately.

'I don't care a straw about dinner,' answered Bess contemptuously; 'only—only I don't like to be left and forgotten—as if—as if I was an umbrella.'

The delicate face flushed deepest carnation, and the large dark eyes sparkled with an angry fire, as the girl spoke. Bruno burst out laughing, moved by the absurdity of this outbreak of temper in a brand snatched from the burning.

'I am sorry I forgot you,' said Lucille gently, but with a gravity which reminded Bess of the gulf between them. 'Mr. Challoner and I are going to luncheon. Take the books and the basket, please, and make haste back to your dinner.'

Lucille and her lover walked slowly towards the parade, leaving Bess to gather up the books and work-basket from under the lee of the boat.

'A decided exhibition of the cloven foot,' said Bruno, smiling. 'I begin to think you've caught a Tartar, Lucille.'

'She was never impertinent or ill-tempered before. I don't understand it in the least.'

'I'm afraid I do. You've heard the vulgar proverb about setting a beggar on horseback. You have been rather too indulgent with that young person, and she is beginning to give herself airs. May I inquire what is the position which she occupies in your household? Is she your companion, or your maid?'

'She will be my maid by-and-by, when Tompion marries; and, in the meantime, Marjy and I are trying to educate her. She is so quick and intelligent that it is a pleasure to teach her.'

'Is there not a fear that you may make her too clever for her place? Tompion never struck me as an intellectual prodigy.'

'Poor Tompion! she is very dull.'

'Exactly, but an efficient servant.'

'An excellent servant,' admitted Lucille.

'Which I fear this young person will never become under your present process. My darling, your sweetness is spoiling her. You have made her insolent already; and the next thing will be the necessity of her dismissal.'

'No, no, Bruno; you do not know what a beautiful nature she has. I cannot tell you how devoted she was to me while I was ill—what an untiring nurse, what an affectionate companion.'

'I know she was deeply anxious about you, as she had good reason to be. I saw her very often in those sad days at Ingleshaw. She was the only person who ever gave me detailed information about my darling.'

'And she used to bring me flowers and messages from you. Sometimes when my mind was all astray, and it was difficult for me to understand what people said to me, she would take pains to let me know that you were near and sorry for me. Do you want me to forget all that, Bruno, now that I am well and that you are with me?'

'No, dear, but I want you to be reasonable. A girl picked out of the gutter is a rough diamond at best. Such a gem must needs require a great deal of polishing before it is worthy to shine side by side with my pearl of price.'

All Lucille's thoughts on that day of reunion were given to her lover. They lunched together, Miss Marjorum—very sharp set after the unaccustomed delay—counting for no more than if she had been a painter's lay-figure. They went for a long ramble together after luncheon, Lucille being eager to make Bruno acquainted with the rural beauties of the surrounding scenery. The landscape around Weymouth is not particularly poetic or striking; but it is rustic and pretty, fertile, varied by hill and hollow, with more timber than is usually to be found in the region of the sea. Bruno thought those country lanes, those grassy hills, the realisation of paradise. The lovers walked and talked, and talked and walked, forgetting time and distance, mankind and the

world, until they had need to hasten in order to reach the house on the parade in time for the eight-o'clock dinner.

'I am afraid you must be dreadfully tired," said Bruno, as they neared the town; 'I ought not to have let you walk so far.'

'I don't feel as if I had walked a mile,' answered Lucille; 'I never felt stronger or better in my life.'

Tompion was waiting to dress her young mistress, and during that hurried toilet Lucille had no time to make any inquiry about Elizabeth, nor was Tompion disposed to volunteer information. She had been standing on her dignity ever since Elizabeth's appearance in the household.

Bruno and his betrothed spent the evening absorbed in each other and Mozart, while Miss Marjorum slumbered placidly in the twilight of the back drawing-room, feeling that she was fulfilling all her duties as a dragon of prudery by the mere fact of her presence. Her slumbering figure, the very image of middle-aged repose, was the incarnation of the proprieties.

The next morning was gray and showery; but Bruno, too happy to sleep late o' mornings, had left his hotel for an early swim before the blinds were drawn up at the house on the parade. When he had had his swim he went for a walk on the sands, careless of light showers. Sea and sky were a dull gray, with gleams of watery light touching the waves here and there.

He had walked some distance, and was nearing the point of the bay, when he overtook a solitary young woman in black. He recognised the tall slim figure, the graceful walk, that free untutored grace which comes of an active life.

'Good-morning, Elizabeth,' he said, overtaking her; 'you are out very early'

She started at the sound of his voice, and turned to meet him, with the same vivid carnation which he had noted yesterday—a blush that might mean surprise, anger, shyness, anything, but which heightened her beauty.

'Why shouldn't I be out?' she asked. 'I suppose the sands are as free to me as to you, though I am a servant.'

This was an impulse of her old unregenerate nature, which prompted her to defiance of her superiors as a kind of self-defence.

'All the world is free to youth and intellect,' said Bruno coolly. 'Why are you so disagreeable? I thought you were a good-tempered, well-meaning young woman, when I saw you at Ingleshaw.'

'I hope I shall always mean well to those who are good to me,' answered the girl; 'but I don't like to be taken up like a plaything, and cast aside and forgotten.'

'How do you mean?'

'Till you came I was with Lady Lucille almost every hour of the day. She taught me, she read to me, she let me sit by her when she played the piano; I got to know all her favourite tunes. But when you came she left me on the beach and forgot me. I have not seen her or heard her voice since then. All yesterday afternoon and evening I sat alone in my little room at the top of the house, and watched the sea.'

'Why prefer solitude when there were Tompion and Mrs. Prince in the housekeeper's room? You might have been with them.'

'No, I mightn't. I hate them and they hate me. I have been a flower-girl; but I am not a servant; and I can't get on with servants.'

'Then I'm afraid you will have to leave Ingleshaw Castle. You can hardly expect to spend your life in the drawing-room with an Earl's daughter.'

'Lady Lucille said she was fond of me, and that she wanted to teach me to be a lady. Why cannot I be with her, if she likes to have me?'

'Because you are a foolish and ungrateful young woman,' replied Bruno, hardening his heart against this girl, whose lovely eyes were fixed upon his face with an appealing look which was full of pathos. 'You are not content to enjoy Lady Lucille's society when it is convenient to her to have you with her. You give yourself offended airs because she prefers her future husband to a person whom she has known only two months, and of whose character and belongings she knows nothing.'

'When I love people I love them with all my soul; I love them until love is like a pain—a slow gnawing pain that eats my heart,' answered the girl impetuously. 'What difference does it make to me that Lady Lucille is an Earl's daughter? She and I are made of the same flesh and blood, are we not?'

'No doubt; but eighteen years' culture and training are in themselves a distinction, to say nothing of hereditary influences,' said Bruno, answering his own thoughts rather than that passionate speaker.

He had been wondering at the delicate beauty, the grand carriage of this gutter-bred creature; the daring with which

she asserted herself, and claimed indulgence for her passionate feelings—she who belonged to the class which has been taught from its cradle to cringe and whine.

And then, gravely yet kindly, he took her to task for her folly.

'My good girl,' he said, 'you are altogether wrong in your manner of looking at your new life. Lady Lucille has been very kind to you—kinder than one young lady in twenty would have been; so kind that she has run counter to the opinion of her father, her governess, and myself, in order to gratify her inclination to help you. But this goodness of hers can give you no claim upon her, beyond the common claim of your helplessness. You have no right to exact more than it is wise or convenient for her to give. If you are willing to be a true and faithful servant to her, to respect her position and your own place as a servant, there is no reason she should not please herself by keeping you in her service; but if you are subject to jealous tempers, she had better find you a place elsewhere, where your affection for your mistress will be less intense, and your notions of a servant's duty will be clearer.'

Elizabeth's heart beat loud and fast as she listened to his cold and measured words. Was it hatred of the speaker which made her so angry? Her passionate soul revolted at the idea of these differences of rank, which made it an impertinence in her to love her benefactress with a jealous and exacting love. Ever since she had been able to think she had been a Radical. Her daring intellect had overleapt the barriers of rank and fortune. Tramping in the mud—bonnetless, almost shoeless—she had looked at the women in carriages, and had told herself that she was as good as they. To her, as to the rugged philosopher Carlyle, it had seemed that the difference between beauty in the gutter and beauty in a three-hundred-guinea barouche was only a question of clothes. She had never heard of hereditary influences—the slow and gradual development of privileged races, the perpetual imperceptible education of favourable surroundings.

'If I was to be no better than a servant—a dog to fetch and to carry, and to eat and drink and get fat—why did Lady Lucille teach me, and read to me, and let me hear her play?' asked Bess. 'She never did as much as that for Tompion.'

'And she was very foolish when she did it for you. She has spoiled the makings of a good servant.'

'I'll try to prove you wrong in that,' answered Bess, frowning defiance at him. 'If I am to be a servant, I'll be a good one. I'll show you that I can keep my place as well as any of them.'

'I shall be very glad to find you can do so,' replied Bruno, turning upon his heel, and leaving the damsel to her reflections.

It was not without compunction that he so left her. He would have liked to have said something kind at parting; but she had shown him the danger of over-much kindness. She was evidently a person who must be ruled with a high hand.

He breakfasted with Lady Lucille and Miss Marjorum, and left them almost immediately after breakfast. He had some business to transact at the other end of the town, he told Lucille—a fact which she was inwardly inclined to resent. What business had he to be anywhere except with her?

When he was gone, Miss Marjorum summoned Elizabeth to her morning studies in the back drawing-room. The girl came, the image of meek obedience, but with pallid cheeks, and red rings round her eyes.

'You have been crying,' said Miss Marjorum severely.

'I had the toothache,' faltered Bess, with her swollen eyelids drooping over the dark eyes.

'And you cried because of the toothache? What childish want of self-command! Are you aware of the great mass of suffering that is always going on in this world; and can you shed tears for any petty pain of your own?'

'One's own pains hurt most,' answered Bess. 'I daresay other people cry about theirs.'

'Only people who are without fortitude and submission to the will of God,' answered Miss Marjorum. 'All suffering is sent us for our benefit.'

'Then I had rather not be benefited—in that way,' said Bess, so meekly that her instructress could hardly resent the remark.

Then came the usual morning's work—multiplication-tables, weights and measures, English grammar, a little geography, a little English history—just that elementary knowledge which would bring Elizabeth May on a level with the lowest form in a Board school. But dry-as-dust though the lessons were, Elizabeth gave all the powers of her mind to the comprehension and digestion of them. She learnt with a quickness that astonished her teacher, who had

never before taught any one with whom lessons meant rescue from the dismal swamp of ignorance and vulgarity.

Elizabeth was still bending over her page of parsing when Bruno came in, flushed and joyous-looking, smelling of sea-breezes and sunshine.

'Lucille, I want you to come for a cruise in my yacht,' he said.

'Your yacht!' exclaimed Lucille, starting up from her work, delighted at her lover's return. 'That is a tremendous joke. How should you come by a yacht?'

'In the most sordid and commonplace manner—I have hired one.'

'Then that was your business this morning?'

'Precisely.'

'O you darling! Pray forgive me.'

'For what?'

'For my wickedness. I thought it was so unkind of you to have business at the other end of the town when I wanted you here.'

'My business was to charter a vessel in which we can explore the coast between Bournemouth and Dawlish. You behold the skipper of the *Urania* sloop, forty tons, crew five men and a boy. For one month certain I am her proud proprietor.'

'And you know how to yacht?' inquired Lucille naïvely.

'I had some small experience in that line in the Mediterranean; but I have engaged the captain of the *Urania*—an old salt. You needn't be afraid to trust yourself on my boat.'

'I would sail across the Atlantic with you in a cockle-shell,' said Lucille.

They were standing on the balcony, out of everybody's hearing, and could afford to be foolish.

'We should both go to the bottom,' answered Bruno; 'but it would be happiness. There she is! How do you like her? Lovely, isn't she?' he asked, gazing seaward.

'I did not know you had any friends here,' said Lucille, looking along the parade with a by no means rapturous expression. She thought her lover had been talking of some fair promenader.

'No more I have, sweet, nor hardly a feminine friend in this wide world except you. The *Urania*, love, yonder against the blue. I sent her round that you might look at her. Are not her lines graceful?'

'She looks very pretty, and how coquettishly she bobs to

the sea!' said Lucille, as the *Urania* dipped her nose to the water. 'When am I to go on board her?'

'Directly after luncheon if you like. We might come home to a nine o'clock dinner.'

'Never mind luncheon. Let us pack up some biscuits and things, and go at once,' exclaimed Lucille, with her eyes on the sloop. 'She doesn't take the slightest notice of us. Have you any means of communicating with the captain?'

'Only a handkerchief. I told him to keep his eye on these houses,' answered Bruno, waving his white silk handkerchief. 'Now he will lay to, and send a boat on shore, and you and Miss Marjorum can come as soon as you please.'

Lucille ran to the back drawing-room to tell the governess what bliss awaited her.

'We are going at once—at once,' she exclaimed, after she had rapidly related Bruno's acquisition of the *Urania*. 'Put on your mushroom-hat directly, like a darling, and bring your biggest sunshade. You can come, Elizabeth. Run down and tell Prince to pack a basket of luncheon, with everything nice that she can get in five minutes—wine, too, for Mr. Challoner, and lemonade for us. And you can bring some nice books with you, though I don't suppose any one will want to read; and my crewel-basket, though I'm sure I shan't work.'

Lucille was gone before Miss Marjorum could question or remonstrate. There was nothing to be done but obey. If she declined to go, the lovers would assuredly go without her; and though the proprieties, as observed between engaged people, might be stretched to allow of a country walk, they would be seriously outraged by yachting without a chaperon. Miss Marjorum loved not the sea, nor the sea her. At her best, she could just manage to escape sea-sickness by maintaining a statuesque immobility which hardly permitted her to think. She would have liked to do her voyages under the influence of chloroform, were that possible.

All the gray clouds had drifted away; the sky was one unbroken blue. Poor Miss Marjorum could not hint a doubt of the weather. She went up to her room, and put on her brown mushroom-hat, and was ready to start when Mrs. Prince's basket was packed—a task which took so long as to make Lucille impatient.

At last everything was ready, and in less than a quarter of an hour afterwards they were all on board—Miss Marjorum seated in a luxurious nest of cushions and shawls, out-

wardly the image of repose, but inwardly suffering, a *Quarterly Review* lying open in her lap, at an interesting article on Herder, of which she was incapable of reading a line; Lucille dancing about the deck after Bruno, looking at this and that, and asking innumerable questions; Elizabeth May sitting in a corner apart, the very furthest corner available, working diligently, and never lifting her eyes from her work.

She had been told that she ought to remember her position as a servant, and she wanted to show Bruno Challoner that she did so remember herself.

They went coasting around by picturesque cliffs; they saw caves, and other wonders of the shore—jelly-fish, and other marvels of the deep. Life, for two out of these four, was steeped in the sunshine that lights an earthly paradise. The summer sea and the summer air were full of rapture. The other two sat still and silently endured—one the agony of suppressed sea-sickness, the other suppressed heartache; though why her heart should ache Elizabeth May hardly knew.

'Why should the sight of their happiness make me miserable?' she asked herself. 'Am I made up of envy and jealousy?'

Many days came after this—long summer days of peerless weather, fresh seas, and flowing sails. They spent every day on the *Urania*. Miss Marjorum's silent sufferings grew less acute. Custom dulled the edge of agony; or it may be that, in the language of the captain, Miss Marjorum was getting her sea-legs. Elizabeth went with them every day, always provided with her work-basket, but she worked very little now, and no longer sat in a remote corner. Were she ever so willing to keep her place as a servant, it was not easy for her to do so, when Lucille was inclined to treat her as a companion; and Lucille was so inclined always, most especially on board the yacht, where the innocent happiness of Bruno's betrothed overflowed in kindliness to everybody. She had the sweetest words and looks even for the sunburnt weatherbeaten old sailors. She made much of them, and gave them dainties out of her ample picnic-basket, and spoiled them for future service, giving them false views of young ladyhood.

Bruno hired a funny little piano, built on purpose for a yacht, and to this he and his betrothed sang many a lover's duet on calm evenings. By-and-by Lucille discovered that Elizabeth had a fine contralto voice, whereupon she taught

the girl to take part in the 'Canadian Boat-Song,' 'Blow, Gentle Gales,' and other sea-going glees. Bruno felt that it was foolish, wrong even, to make this girl the companion of their lives, she whose earlier life was unknown to them, save by her unattested record of bare facts. He remonstrated with Lucille, and then gave way. It was true that Elizabeth was an exceptional person; the lowness of her bringing up had left no indelible stamp of vulgarity. She grew more refined in manner and diction, nay, even in ideas, every day of her life. It was impossible to dispute her innate superiority: a rough diamond perhaps, but assuredly a diamond of purest water, and one that took kindly to the polishing process.

She had never lost her temper since that first day. If the lovers forgot or neglected her, she sat apart and held her peace, patiently awaiting Lucille's pleasure; or she sat at Miss Marjorum's feet and read aloud, her instructress feeling very proud of her progress.

For nearly six weeks they lived this happy life. Lord Ingleshaw sometimes joined them for a few days; and on those occasions Elizabeth May fell into the background of their existence, keeping respectfully aloof from the grave gray-bearded elderly man, whom she regarded with deepest awe. They explored every bit of the coast, from Durlstone Head to the Start Point, sometimes spending a couple of nights on board the *Urania*, until Miss Marjorum grew so familiar with Neptune, that it was a wonder to her to think she had ever been a bad sailor.

In all these summer days of varying weather Elizabeth never wearied of the sea, whether she sat alone and apart, absorbed in her own thoughts, or joined in the amusements of Lady Lucille and Mr. Challoner. The sea was a source of unfailing delight to her. It was the wildest, grandest thing she had ever seen. Mountain and moorland she knew not, nor prairie, nor forest; the green fields and low hills of Kent were all she had seen of Nature's grandeur, until she came suddenly face to face with ocean. Her first experience of a tempest was rapture. She stood on deck, lashed and beaten by the rain, buffeted by the wind, and watched the lightning gleaming on the dark leaden waters, and the livid white crests of the waves that seemed to leap up against the blackened sky. She revelled in the tumult of the scene. And the calm summer aspect of the sea was all the more beautiful in her eyes after she had seen the might and horror of the storm.

The happiest days must end. September was nearly over. The days were shortening, the evening breezes were growing chill, albeit the noontides were as sunny as midsummer. Bruno was to surrender his command of the *Urania* in a day or two; and Lucille and her governess were under orders for Ingleshaw Castle, where his lordship had already taken up his abode in readiness for the pheasant-shooting. There was to be no parting between these happy lovers; but their sea-going days were over; and Lucille's spirit was shadowed by a faint cloud of melancholy at the thought that such blissful days could come to an end.

'I wonder whether we shall ever come to Weymouth again?' she said, looking dreamily at the picturesque bay from her low luxurious seat on deck.

'I don't know, love; I think our next yachting experiences should be in more romantic waters—off the Orkneys or the Hebrides.'

'I think I would rather come here again. We can never be happier than we have been here,' said Lucille softly.

'Yes, yes, we can; our souls may take a higher flight in bolder, grander scenes; we will sail under Italian skies, over the tideless blue of the Mediterranean. I will show you Capri, Paestum, Cyprus; there shall be a perpetual crescendo in our happiness!'

'That cannot be, Bruno; nothing can surpass perfection; and I have been perfectly happy here.'

'You are too logical for me,' he said, with a faint sigh.

'How wearily you spoke just then!' exclaimed Lucille, looking at him with sudden anxiety; 'you have had such a pale and tired look for the last few days, Bruno. I hope you are not ill.'

'Ill? no; I was never better in my life. But there is a certain tameness in this coast; it is just possible for one to have enough of it. I am glad we are going back to Ingleshaw.'

'For the sake of shooting those poor pheasants. What a pity that even the most amiable Englishman should be created with a propensity to murder!'

This was their last day. They had gone for a long sail, and it was late in the evening when they neared Weymouth, under a full moon.

This day had not been so perfectly happy as other days. Bruno was tired or out of spirits. Lucille could not tell which. He did not interest himself in the sailing of the yacht, never touching a rope all through the day, he who

was usually so active. He lay on a rug at Lucille's feet, reading a newspaper or talking to her, in a somewhat listless fashion. And now, in the moonlight, he was pacing the little deck, with a restless air that seemed like a rebellion against the narrow space to which he was confined.

Lucille went down into the cabin to fetch an extra wrap, and stayed there for about a quarter of an hour talking to Miss Marjorum, who was comfortably ensconced on the sofa, placidly digesting a very good dinner. On her return to the deck, Lucille saw Bruno and Elizabeth seated side by side, the girl's face clearly visible in the bright moonlight—a pale impassioned face turned towards Bruno, with tears streaming down the cheeks. He had his hand on her shoulder, and he was talking to her in a voice so low that it was drowned by the faint plash of the waves, yet with an unmistakable earnestness of manner.

For a few moments Lucille stood aghast. The passionate imploring look in the girl's eyes, the attitude of the man, which seemed one of appeal or entreaty—what could these mean except that one hideous treason which would change the colour of Lucille Challoner's life? She stood as if changed to stone; she felt as if she had suddenly stepped upon the edge of an abyss, saw the black gulf yawning below her, and knew that she must fall into it. Only for a few moments did she stand looking at those two figures in the bows, every line clearly defined in the broad silver light, and then she advanced towards them with a quiet step, and looked at them with a frank and not unfriendly gaze, slow to believe in evil, despite this agony of doubt gnawing her heart.

'Is there anything the matter, Bruno?'

He had started ever so slightly at her footstep, but he looked up at her now steadily enough, with grave, unabashed eyes, his hand still resting lightly on Elizabeth's shoulder.

'Only the realisation of my own fear. This girl is not happy in the artificial life she has been leading with us. It does not suit her temper or her temperament. You must find her more occupation, regular duties, a place to fill in your father's household, or in somebody else's. This idle ornamental life of ours wearies her.'

He rose from the bench, leaving Elizabeth sitting there, silent, downcast.

'Is this true, Elizabeth?' asked Lucille.

'Yes.'

'Then you should have made your complaints to me, and

not to Mr. Challoner; he can hardly be expected to understand your feelings,' Lucille answered, in colder accents than Bruno had ever heard before from her lips.

'What did she say to you, Bruno?' Lucille asked presently, when she and her lover were standing side by side, out of Elizabeth's hearing.

'O, I hardly know!' he answered, with a touch of impatience. 'Another outbreak of temper like that of which I told you six weeks ago. You have been most unwise in your treatment of her. Instead of being grateful, she is discontented with her position. I warned you against this result, Lucille.'

'How harshly you speak, Bruno! I could not help being fond of the girl: and I did not think she could be ungrateful,' said Lucille slowly.

She had hardly recovered from the bewilderment which had seized her at sight of those two figures—the pale face wet with tears, the passionate eyes turned towards Bruno. Her lover's explanation, given with such a cold matter-of-fact air, went far to satisfy her; but it was not altogether satisfactory. Unused as she was to encounter falsehood, unsuspicious as she was of wrong, she had yet an unhappy feeling, as of one who walks in the dark with a vague sense of danger close at hand. She could hardly see the lamp-lit semicircle of the bay, the white houses gleaming in the moonlight, for the tears that clouded her eyes, tears wrung from her by a nameless agony.

She hardly spoke to Bruno during the business of landing, and it was only when they were on the doorstep that Bruno found anything to say to her, and then it was but to bid a brief good-night. All their plans were made for the next day—Bruno was to meet them at the station and escort them to Ingleshaw.

CHAPTER V.

A LEAF FROM THE BOOK OF THE PAST.

'Sir, you and I must part,—but that's not it:
Sir, you and I have loved,—but there's not it.'

It was the first week in October, and the woods at Ingleshaw were deepening to that sombre green which precedes the glory of the autumnal reds and yellows; the chestnuts had already put on the tawny hue of decay, and the russet leaves fell heavily on the soft grass in the avenue; but oaks and beeches held their own yet against the destroyer.

The gardens were vivid with gaudy autumn flowers; but the roses still bloomed in sheltered places, and the hothouses were full of summer bloom.

Life at Ingleshaw Castle moved upon more conventional lines than that unceremonious existence on board the *Urania*. Lucille and her lover no longer spent their days in almost unbroken companionship, albeit they were living under one roof. Lord Ingleshaw was fond of shooting, and expected Bruno to be equally enthusiastic; so these two spent most of their mornings in the woods, with a keeper and a couple of dogs, shooting pheasants in the old-fashioned country-squire or country-parson style.

Lucille's aunt, Lady Carlyon, had arrived at the Castle on a visit of indefinite duration.

'I shall stay as long as ever you contrive to keep me amused, my dear,' she said; 'so it will be your own fault if I go away soon. Ingleshaw is quite the dullest place I know; but there is a soothing influence in its dulness which always makes me feel better afterwards—like what people say of the Engadine, don't you know. It's not that you feel particularly well while you are there, but you find yourself in such splendid health directly you get away.'

To amuse Lady Carlyon was no light duty. She liked her neice to go to her at half-past eight with her early cup of tea, and read little bits of the newspaper to her before she got up. This helped to awaken her brain, she said. She required company in her morning saunter round the gardens. She wanted her neice's sympathy with her crewel work, an

art which she carried to great perfection, but for which she required a good deal of assistance from other people. She liked to have one of Anthony Trollope's novels read to her; and she entered warmly into the loves and perplexities of his young people. She liked to hear her favourite bits of Mozart. In fact, she liked to keep Lucille about her in an elegant kind of slavery all day long; while poor Lucille was longing to be trudging through the woods, following the far-off sound of the guns, so as to meet the sportsmen after their morning's work, and to sit on some grassy bank with them while they ate their picnic luncheon.

Lady Carlyon professed herself delighted at her niece's engagement.

'I think I could hardly have done better for you myself, if I had brought you out next season,' she said. 'No doubt your father always intended you and Bruno to marry. It is such a comfortable way of adjusting things. Bruno will have the estate, and you will have a good deal of money, without which Bruno would have found it rather difficult to manage.'

'Aunt Ethel, you surely don't think—' began Lucille, turning very pale.

'I don't think that he cares more for the money than for you!' cried the dowager; 'of course I don't. What a silly sensitive child you are! Everybody knows that he adores you; but the money will be very useful to him all the same. It will make it much easier for him to be a good landlord. Nobody ought to depend solely on land nowadays. Your father tells me that you and Bruno are to be married at Ingleshaw Church early in the new year. I should have preferred Westminster Abbey, and the height of the season; but George is a person with whom it is quite useless to argue. He does not intend you to be presented until after your marriage, which will save trouble, he says. What an absurd idea! You ought to have made your hit as one of the beauties of the season before you were married. It would have been a *cachet* for you when you began your career as a wife. But men have no foresight; and my brother is just forty years behind the age in all his ideas.'

'But I would ever so much rather be married quietly at Ingleshaw than have a grand London wedding, aunt Ethel,' answered Lucille.

'Well, it will save a good deal of money, and that seems to be all that people of our rank think about nowadays,' said Lady Carlyon contemptuously.

'I am sure *that* is not my father's reason,' said Lucille.

'Perhaps not. Your father was always fond of hiding his light under a bushel. Give him his worm-eaten old books and a quiet corner, and he is content. And now, Lucille, now about your trousseau? It is time you began to see about that.'

'Dearest aunt, when I don't even know in what month I am going to be married! There is plenty of time.'

'There is never plenty of time where dressmakers are concerned,' answered Lady Carylon, with authority. 'I know what the creatures are, and how little trust there is to be put in them. If you want the best people to work for you, you must give them good notice.'

'Why cannot Miss Sanderson make my gowns, aunt? She has done very well for me hitherto.'

Miss Sanderson was the chief milliner and mantua-maker of Sevenoaks, and was looked up to as a great authority on Paris fashions.

'My child, you have been in the nursery,' shrieked Lady Carylon, 'and it did not matter a straw what you wore. But do you suppose Miss Sanderson is the proper person to launch you in society? Half a woman's success, nowadays, depends on her dressmaker. Your gowns fit you well enough, I allow. It is really wonderful how these country dressmakers contrive to fit so well, when a forty-guinea gown from Regent-street will come home all wrinkles. But it is not enough nowadays that a woman's gowns should fit. They must be original, daring. Every new gown should be a new departure. I have been reflecting seriously upon this matter, and I have come to the conclusion that your dinner and visiting gowns must be made by Muntzowski.'

'What an extraordinary name! Who is Muntzowski?'

'Quite the newest dressmaker in London. She is a Pole, and a born artist. Forty years ago Balzac declared that the Slavonic temperament was the artistic temperament: but this is the first development of the Slavonic mind in dressmaking. Muntzowski's gowns are something *hors ligne*. She has a feeling for colour, an audacity in her outlines, unknown hitherto. Dressed by Muntzowski you will be the rage.'

'Dear aunt, if you knew how little I care about my gowns, beyond wearing the colours Bruno likes best—'

'Don't affect eccentricity, Lucille. It is every sensible woman's object in life to be dressed better than her neigh-

bours. In what else can a woman of rank surpass the common herd? Can she ever hope to play or sing as well as the people she can hire? Can she paint as well as a professional painter? or sit her horse as well as a country squire's daughter, who only lives to follow the hounds? A woman of fashion cannot afford to fritter away her time upon accomplishments. There are two things in which she ought to be perfect—her gowns and her conversation. I shall take you up to town next week to see Muntzowski.'

Lucille laughed at her aunt's intensity, but promised to do whatever her father desired with regard to that mountain of new clothes which the feminine mind considers indispensable to matrimony. It was natural to her to be gracefully and prettily dressed; and her own artistic taste had always modified the fashions which Miss Sanderson recommended to her notice. To please her father—to please Bruno—had been her highest ambition; and she could not imagine a state of being in which the admiration of the outside world would be of any value to her.

Lady Carylon heard of her neice's goodness to Elizabeth May—heard, and disapproved, just as Miss Marjorum had disapproved. She thought the scarlet fever was only a just consequence of Lucille's folly.

'I only hope it will be a lesson which will make you wiser in the future,' she said. 'But I am very sorry to find you have kept the ungrateful minx in the house.'

'It was not her fault I was ill, aunt,' remonstrated Lucille; 'and she nursed me devotedly through my illness.'

'Nursed you devotedly, indeed! Artful hussy! Of course, once having got her nose inside the Castle, she was eager enough to stay. I saw her in the corridor the other day, and I didn't at all like the look of her. Sly, Lucille, sly. The sooner you get rid of her the better.'

'I am sure you misjudge her, aunt,' said Lucille, with a troubled look. Her mind had never been clear about Elizabeth since that night on board the yacht.

'I never misjudged any one in my life,' replied Lady Carylon positively. 'I always begin by thinking badly of persons of that class; and I have never been disappointed in the result. What are you going to do with that young woman?

'I intended her to fill Tompion's place—'

'To take her as your own maid? Absurd!'

'I'm afraid she is too good for that.'

'Too good!' shrieked Lady Carlyon. 'A creature rescued from the gutter, who has never been taught hairdressing,

and cannot have a notion of altering a gown—a chit utterly without experience! What could she do for your figure or your complexion, if either were to give way suddenly?'

Lucille did not enter upon these details. She hoped that it would be very long before her toilet became a work of art, like her aunt's.

'I have changed my mind about Elizabeth,' she said. 'She is so intellectual, so quick at learning, so superior in all her ideas, that I think she would do better as a governess. She might begin in a very humble way—teaching young children, and carrying on her own education all the while; and by and by she would be fit for a superior situation.'

'O, as a nursery governess—to trudge about country lanes with troublesome children—she might do very well. But that is a way of being buried alive which a young woman with her good looks will not endure long, I'm afraid,' added Lady Carlyon.

The return to Ingleshaw had ended the daily, and almost hourly, association between Lady Lucille and her *protégée*. Lord Ingleshaw's presence at the Castle altered the manner of his daughter's life. It was no longer possible for her, had she been so inclined, to have Elizabeth May about her as a companion. Elizabeth fell back naturally into the place which had been at first given to her. She occupied a little room communicating with Tompion's large and airy chamber. She worked industriously at plain sewing, and did any light housework which Tompion could find for her to do. She attended to the flowers in Lady Lucille's rooms, and this, of all tasks, seemed her favourite occupation.

But although she was relegated to the position of a servant, her education still went on. Miss Marjorum had very little to occupy her now that Lady Carlyon was established at the Castle, and was glad to employ her superfluous energies in urging Elizabeth May along the thorny path of culture. She gave three hours a day to the task of tuition, delighted to have so docile a pupil, entranced by the sound of her own voice as she pronounced those Johnsonian sentences which had gone over the heads of so many young scions of patrician trees, but which had never been so meekly and reverently listened to as they were by Elizabeth. The field which had so long been left fallow, this virgin soil of a young untutored mind, now gave the promise of a splendid harvest.

Miss Marjorum entered heartily into the notion of

Elizabeth's beginning a life of usefulness as a nursery governess.

'It is the most honourable career open to a woman,' she said. 'It is the one profession which a lady can enter without a blush. The governess can pass through life without overstepping the bounds of maidenly modesty. She need never come in contact with the ruder sex. She is a nun without the restraint of the convent. And under her fostering care are developed the minds of the future. She is the intellectual mother of great men and accomplished women. Many a distinguished *savant* can trace his success in life to the care with which his governess prepared him for Eton. Many a woman of rank owes her greatest social triumphs to the thoroughness with which she was taught her French verbs.'

Elizabeth listened with a faint sigh, and a silence which Miss Marjorum took for assent. She was very eager to learn: yet it did not seem to her that an earthly paradise opened before the footsteps of a nursery governess. To walk about the Kentish lanes with little children dragging at her skirts, to sit in a rectory parlour teaching the alphabet or cutting bread-and-butter—well, it would be an honourable drudgery among fair and cleanly surroundings; but it would be no less a drudgery than the old life of the muddy streets and the flower-basket. And in this new life there would be no one to care for her; while in the old life there had been some one who loved her passionately—some one of whom she now thought with a shudder—but whose love had been sweet to her once.

She saw very little of Lady Lucille now, and when they did meet it seemed as if there were a gulf between them. Lucille was kind, but her manner was statelier than it had been. She expressed an interest in Elizabeth's studies; but the old friendly warmth, the girlish playfulness which had made Elizabeth forget that they were not equals, had altogether vanished. One day the girl took courage to ask if she had offended her patroness.

'No, Elizabeth,' Lucille answered gravely; 'but you have disappointed me a little. You remember what Mr. Challoner said that last night on the yacht.'

'Yes,' faltered Elizabeth, with downcast eyes.

'He told me that you were not happy; and then I saw that my first plan for your life was a mistake. You could not be as I had fancied, my maid, and almost my companion. Your jealous temper would not allow that.'

'Only jealous because I love too well,' said Elizabeth, still looking downward, and with a hectic flush upon her cheeks.

'I do not think that is the best kind of love. I saw then that I had been mistaken, and that it would be better that your new life should be independent of mine. You take so kindly to education, and you are so young, that it is only fair your mind should be allowed to develop itself. As a lady's-maid you could have very little opportunity for improvement; as a governess your education need never stop.'

'And when I am old I shall be a kind of learned machine, like Miss Marjorum,' said Elizabeth.

"Surely that will be better than selling flowers in the streets,' answered Lucille coldly.

'Yes, that was a dreadful life,' said the girl, with a faint shudder. 'I sometimes look back and wonder how I ever bore it; but when I look forward there seems nothing much worth living for. Life seems all blank, somehow.'

She set down the vase of flowers which she had been arranging, and left the room. Her step was slow and heavy. She had a listless air which struck Lucille, whose eyes followed her to the door.

'She is changed in some way,' thought Lucille. 'I can't understand her.'

Now that it was fully understood that Elizabeth May was to be educated, and was to earn her living by-and-by as a governess, she was no longer obliged to associate with the servants; and this was an infinite relief to her. They were much more respectable, much better mannered, than the disreputable companions of her girlhood; but she had found it harder to get on with them. Their world was not her world. They despised her on account of her antecedents; they disliked her as an interloper, and were utterly unable to recognize that inborn superiority which raised her above them. She had now escaped from all association with the servants, except Tompion, who was more kindly disposed towards her now that she was no longer intended for Lady Lucille's own service. Elizabeth took her meals in the little sitting-room where Tompion worked, in company with a sewing-machine and a bloated spaniel of affectionate temper, which Tompion had reared from puppyhood to asthmatic age. It was a lonely life which she was now leading at Ingleshaw Castle, a life which gave her ample leisure for thought, and for the contemplation of that future which, as she had said, seemed blank and empty.

Sometimes of an afternoon, when she had finished her task of needlework, she would go for a lonely ramble in the park. Lady Lucille had given her leave to go where she liked within the boundary of the fence, which enclosed a space of between six and seven miles in circumference.

It was drawing towards the end of October, and those warm sunshiny days on the blue water seemed to belong to a remote past, when Elizabeth started upon one of these lonely rambles. The sky was a dull gray, and there was a stormy feeling in the air; but Elizabeth was not afraid of bad weather. She had grown very weary of the silence of the corridor outside her lonely room, and even the endearments of the obese spaniel, which insisted upon clambering into her lap, had not been sufficient to beguile her mind of its sadness.

Her step grew lighter when she was out in the air, under the dull autumn sky. She paused on her way down stairs to look out of a window from which she could see Lucille, Bruno, and two girls from the parsonage, playing tennis on the wide level lawn. How bright and gay those figures in pink and blue gowns looked under the gray sky, against the velvety green sward, the warm red wall! What an air of happiness in those quick movements, that light laughter!

'I suppose God meant *them* to be always happy,' she thought; 'but I was born different. When I came here I thought I was going to be happy; yes, I was quite happy—as happy as I could be in heaven; and then—'

She ended with a long sigh, and turned impatiently from the window. Her last look at the lawn showed her Bruno talking confidentially to Lucille, as they stood aside in a pause of the game.

The wind was tossing the fir-tree tops when Elizabeth entered the plantation where Lucille found her asleep in the fair May morning. Everything wore a different aspect now. There were hardly any flowers left—a tuft of harebells here and there on a grassy knoll, a belated orchis, a few autumn violets. The firs looked dark and wintry, and every gust swept a shower of yellow leaves from the young oaks. Elizabeth had rambled a long way round the chase before she entered the plantation, and now she sat down to rest almost on the spot where Lucille found her.

'I wonder what would have happened to me if she had not come this way that day? Should I have lain here till I died, or should I have found strength to crawl a little further along the dusty road that leads to the Union? Even then

I don't know if they would have taken me in. I should have been only a casual.'

She spoke these last words aloud, in a low quiet voice, as she sat listless and meditative, with one ungloved hand straying idly among the bracken on the bank by her side.

'Not much comfort for casuals anywhere, eh, Bess?' said a voice close at hand; and a man, slender, lithe, sinewy, rose with a sudden undulating movement, like a snake, from the deep rank fern.

The girl looked at him with wide bewildered eyes; and, as she looked, every vestige of colour faded out of her face; even the parted lips whitened as her breath came and went flutteringly.

'Tom! Is it you?' she faltered faintly.

'Who should it be? Did you expect Jack—or Joe—or Bill—or Jim?' he asked, with a harsh laugh, gathering himself into a sitting position upon the bank, and stretching out a sinuous arm with the evident intention of encircling the girl's waist; but she drew herself suddenly away, with an angry look in her dark eyes.

'What's the matter, my lass? Sure to goodness, you're not going to turn your back upon me because you're up in the world, and I'm down!'

'You left me to starve,' answered Bess, with lowered eyelids, sitting as far from him as the bank allowed, her attitude and countenance distinctly expressive of abhorrence; 'I don't quarrel with you for that. Perhaps you couldn't help it; perhaps you didn't care. But when you left me once, you left me for ever. You and I had done with each other.'

'No, we hadn't, lady fair,' said the man, looking up at her from his lower place, with a cunning grin. 'It might have been so if I'd had my way. But you and your pal, the city missionary, worked it out different. You wanted all things correct and reg'lar. Church and parson; love, honour, and obey, and all the usual patter; and, by the living Jingo, you shall obey!'

'I should have died in this wood, if it hadn't been for the young lady who found me, and took me to her beautiful home, and brought me back to life by her kindness,' said Elizabeth, still looking downward, staring sullenly at the grass, with its infinite variety of hue, from green to russet.

'Yes, and pampered you, and made a fool of you, and had you taught to play the lady,' sneered the man, 'I know all about it.'

'How do you know?'

'Because I'm not a fool, and am used to keep my eyes and

my ears open. I've been on the tramp for the last three weeks and it was only yesterday as I dropped into this blooming bit of country, and stopped for a meal of victuals at the Cat and Fiddle—a neat little old fashioned sort of a pub at the end of the village. The rum cull of the casa happens to be a friendly sort of a chap—very free with the patter; so I let him jaw. I asked him a few leading questions about that blooming Castle over there, which I could see the tops of the towers over the trees, like a scene at the poor old Vic.; and he jawed no end about the Hurl, and the young lady, and how she was the most charitable young lady as never was, and how she'd picked up a beautiful young creetur in the wood, at death's door, and had took her home, and kind of 'dopted her like—a pore young thing as was on the tramp to jine her sweetheart at Dover. Now I can't say if it was the mention of Dover, or whether it was the old Cat and Fiddle's patter about your good looks, and your black eyes, and your name o' Bess, which he dropped promiscuous, that put me up to trap; but it comed into my blessed noddle that this young 'ooman was my gal, and none other.'

The landlord of the Cat and Fiddle was Tompion's maternal uncle, and Tompion's evenings out were sometimes spent in the private parlour of that rustic inn; so Bess was not surprised at the publican's readiness to talk about Ingleshaw Castle and its inhabitants.

'So I makes up my mind to hang out at the Cat and Fiddle for a night,' pursued Tom, sprawling at ease upon the bank, 'and I loafs about to-day till I falls in with you. I've been up at the Castle, and had a look about me, and I heerd there as you was fond of walking alone in the woods; so I prowled about here till I seed you; and an uncommon chilly welcome I've got for my pains.'

'What do you want with me?' asked the girl sullenly flashing one angry glance at him and letting her eyelids fall again, as if she had looked at something hateful. 'You beat me.'

'Only when I was mad with the drink, my lass.'

'Mad with drink? yes. You spent the money upon which we might have lived a decent life—like Christians, or at any rate like human beings—on drink that changed you into a savage. You made me work for you as well as for myself. You let me starve, and you left me.'

'Only when I'd got into trouble, and London was too hot to hold me.'

'You told me you'd enlisted, and that your regiment was going to India.'

'There was a touch of romance in that, Bess. I thought you was hard on me, and I wanted to melt your stubborn heart. I had some thoughts of taking the Queen's shilling when I left London, but I thought better of it on reflection. Liberty's worth more than a bob, and I had no fancy for the guard-room or the cat.'

'You told me nothing but lies, then? You never went to Dover?'

'Not any nearer than Rochester. I've been working in a circle within thirty or forty mile of London.'

'What kind of work have you been doing?'

The man looked meditative, felt in his pockets for a short pipe, found it, filled it, lighted it, and then replied carelessly,

'Odd jobs—anythink. You know I'm pretty handy

'Stable work?' interrogated Elizabeth.

'Partly stables. A fellow that's down on his luck can't afford to be particklar. And now tell me what kind of a berth you've got up yonder. It was like your luck to drop into such quarters. And, O scissors, ain't we smart! A brand-new black gound as fits us like the skin of a eel, and sech ladylike boots! Blest if ever I know'd you'd such a pretty foot, Bess!' he added, looking admiringly at the slender foot with its well-developed instep, which Bess tucked under her gown with an angry movement as he spoke.

'Well, I'm blowed! That's the first time I knowed it was high treason for a husband to admire his wife's trotters,' exclaimed Tom Brook, with an injured air. 'All I can say is, as I said afore, it was like your luck to get free quarters at Ingleshaw Castle.'

'It was the first good luck that ever came my way; and now I suppose you've come to spoil it all.'

'No, I ain't. I'm not such a selfish beggar as that. I'm not agoing to say, "Bess, you're my wife, and if I have to tramp the country, you must pad the hoof alongside o' me." No, you've got a good home, and you'd better stick to it as long as ever you can. But I want you to bear in mind all the same as I'm your husband, and to be civil and pleasant spoken when you and me meet promiscuous, as we have this afternoon.'

'You mean that you are to hang about this place, and that I am to meet you—secretly?' she asked.

'I don't know what you mean by hanging about. If I find I can get a job of work in the village, I shall stay; if I can't—'

A knowledge of certain dark antecedents in Mr. Brook's

early life—escapades which in his class of life had counted only as the wild oats of youthful indiscretion, and of which Bess herself had thought lightly enough when she married him—now inclined her to suspect his motives.

'What work can there be for you in such a place as Ingleshaw village?' she asked.

'There's always work for me where there's horses,' answered Tom Brook. 'I'll get somethin' to do, don't you be afeard; and I won't spile your little game. You shall play the lady up at the Castle for the next six months, if yer like, till I've made a potful of money, and can come and claim yer, with a good coat on my back and a top 'at on my 'ed, like a born swell. But you'll have to bear in mind you're my wife, and be civil and obedient in the mean time, my lady. I'm not going to stand any gammon.'

His wife looked at him with eyes in which dark fires of scorn and hate were strangely blended. She herself hardly knew in that moment, whether she most despised or most hated him. Yet she had loved him once, or believed she loved him, when, of all the brutes among whom she herded, this brute alone had shown a touch of kindness and pity for her, and had cherished her, after his rough fashion, with a feeling which was not altogether brutal.

But now—now that her ears had grown used to another language, that her eyes had looked upon another race—the face and the voice, the tones, the movements of this man, who was by law her master, inspired such aversion, such an infinite, unspeakable loathing as she had never felt in her life before—no, not for the vilest of that vile herd in which she had been born and reared. She was a creature of strong feelings; one of those fierce tropical natures which crop up now and then among the sober northern races. Her love and her hatred had ever been more intense than other people's; and now she shrank shuddering and abhorrent from the man whose caress had once seemed a friendly shelter.

'You left me of your own accord,' she said, in low resolute tones. He could hear the change in her accentuation, just as he could see the refinement of her appearance—every line softened, every hue more delicate than in the old days. 'You lied to me of your own accord. I followed you—as far as I could go—on the road to Dover, dying of hunger all the while; followed you till I fell down in this wood, and never thought to get up again. You left me in the workhouse infirmary, dying, as you were told. You sent me a scrap of a letter to say you had enlisted, and were going to Dover

with a regiment that was under orders for India in two month's time. When I got round again, you told me, I must get on as best I might, till better times—when you should have served your time, and could come back to London and make a home for me. That letter of yours was all falsehood from beginning to end. You only wanted to get rid of me—civilly. And now I want to get rid of you—civilly. I will live the rest of my life alone, remembering that I am a married woman, for the sake of my promise in the church; but I will never acknowledge you as my husband, or live with you as your wife.'

She confronted him steadily as she spoke, looked him through and through, and defied him, every feature in her grandly beautiful face rigid with the intensity of her feeling. No man, looking at her, could doubt that she meant what she said, and would carry out her resolve to the bitter end.

'Won't you, my lady!' exclaimed Mr. Brook, scowling at her savagely, but with a half-timorous irresolution in his looks, as of one not quite prepared to cope with this fiery spirit. 'We'll see if we can't compel yer. The law's uncommon rough upon husbands and wives when they go for to shirk their 'sponsabilities, especially wives. You'll find the law come down upon you heavy, if I once say the word.'

'But you won't say the word. You daren't go to Lord Ingleshaw, and say, "I'm an honest man, and that woman is my wife." You daren't face him. He's a county magistrate, and the kind of man to read you like an open book.'

'Who said I was going to Lord Ingleshaw?' exclaimed the man with a sudden change of tone; 'not that I'm afeared o' yer Lord Ingleshaws, or any other blessed old blokes of the same stamp. I've held their 'osses afore now, when I've been down on my luck, outside o' the Hadmirality or the 'Orse Guards, and I know what shaky old coves they is—gone at the knees and weak in the pastern-jints. Didn't I say as I wasn't goin' to spile yer game? I only wants a bit o' civility and friendly feelin', for the sake o' old long Sims, as we say in the classics. Come, old gal, be civil to a feller, and tell us what you've been a doin' of all this time.'

So addressed, Bess relented a little. The hard lines about her mouth relaxed, the darkly brooding eyes shed a gentler light. She told her husband briefly how she had been saved from death by Lady Lucille's Christian charity, and made a new creature by her generous affection.

'Well, she must be uncommon green,' remarked Mr. Brook at the close of this narration, 'to pick up a young woman as might have been a regular old hand—an out-and-out gaol-bird—and to take her into sech a house as Ingleshaw Castle, and give her the run of the place! And I suppose there's as much silver there—in the way of forks and spoons, and tea-urns and dish-kivers, and sechlike—as would stock a silversmith's shop.'

'There is everything beautiful in the house; but Lady Lucille cares more for flowers and china, and books and music, than for all the silver in the world; and so do I.'

'Ah, that's the way with young women. They're jest like children, caught by pretty colours what strikes the eye. But if I was a nobleman, I'd have my dinin'-table a mask of solid silver jugs and tankards, and dish-kivers and butter-boats, and sechlike. I'd never eat off anythink but silver; and I make no doubt Lord Ingleshaw eats his victuals off solid silver every day of his blessed old life.'

'I don't know,' answered Bess indifferently; 'but I shouldn't think it likely. He's a very simple-minded gentleman, plain in all his ways: but he is a gentleman. I never knew what the word meant till I saw him—and one other.'

'Ah, I knows the kind o' bloke,' said Mr. Brook, with an astute air—'fine spread o' shirt-front and shepherd's-plaid kickseys, a gold-'eaded cane and a double-barrelled heye-glass. And now tell us all about the 'ouse; a reg'lar harmy o' servants, I'll be bound; all eatin' their 'eads off, like pampered 'osses.'

Bess did not tell him the number of the servants; nor did she gratify him with any details as to the interior arrangements of the Castle. Her suspicions had been aroused by his eagerness upon the subject of the Ingleshaw plate. She had never known him concerned in actual crime; but she knew that his interpretation of the law of property was easy, not to say loose; and she was determined to give him as little information as possible—only so much, in fact, as he could wring from her by persistent questioning. Nor, when he persisted in a course of inquiry which seemed suspicious, did she hesitate to give him misleading answers.

He was too acute, too thoroughly steeped in cunning, not to see that she was deceiving him; but he did not broadly accuse her of falsehood. He heard her with a mocking twinkle in his rat-like eyes, whistled a snatch of the last popular melody which had thrilled the music-halls of Bermondsey, cocked his hat over his brow, and pocketed his

empty pipe, as he rose from the bank where he had been reposing.

'That'll do,' he said. 'Ta-ta, my lass. When I want to look you up, I shall know where to find you.'

He walked slowly away without another word, vanishing among the dark straight fir-trunks into dim leafy distance, leaving Elizabeth May still seated, drawn close up against the tree, as she had drawn herself when first he approached, instinctively shrinking from him.

She sat pale, motionless, with fixed eyes, while the light faded, and purple and umber shadows thickened in the dimness under the trees. She sat there till she looked only a dark blotch upon the dusk of the landscape. Yet, thus seated, thus faintly distinguishable, she was seen by a man who came sauntering along the narrow woodland path smoking a cigarette. He came close to her, bent over her, looked her full in the face; she looking up at him with agonized eyes, but never stirring.

'Elizabeth, what is the matter? why are you sitting here alone in the dark?'

He had questioned her once before about herself and her own feelings—that night on board the yacht—and had got nothing for his pains but tears and a passionate protest against Fate—broken burning words that had stirred some strange half-dormant passion within him, which thrilled responsive to that subtle unexpressed passion in her. On that fatal night he had known that she loved him; and he had known as certainly that he loved her. From that hour to this they had never spoken to each other, had avoided each other's path as much as possible, or had met and passed with averted looks, or that blank icy stare which sees nothing.

'Elizabeth, what has happened?' he asked; and the unconscious tenderness of his tone moved her like sweetest music.

'Not very much. I have been brought face to face with my old life, that is all.'

The tears welled into her eyes and poured down her ashen cheeks; her breast heaved with passionate sobs. That sympathetic voice of Bruno's had loosened the fountain. Till now she had hardened her heart to bear her burden; but his sympathy was more than she could bear.

'You have heard something, or seen some one,' he speculated. 'How white you are, and your hands are icy cold!' touching them as they lay loosely clasped in her lap. 'Elizabeth, you are crying!'

The sight of her tears made him forget everything. Another moment—a moment in which his heart beat like a sledge-hammer—he was sitting by her side upon the bank, his arm round her waist, her head resting on his shoulder.

'My dear one, I would give my life to comfort you!' he cried passionately.

Only for a moment did she rest in that embrace, and yet it seemed to her as if she had been lifted into the empyrean, as if she were in a diviner, purer world, where nothing less than perfect joy could live. She felt as Helen may feel, resting in the arms of Achilles, in that sacred isle where death dwells not—perfect beauty, perfect manhood, courage, honour inviolate, linked for ever in immortal union. Only for a moment did Bess abandon herself to that entrancing dream of loving and being beloved by him who was to her as godlike as that son of Thetis; and then she remembered who he was, and who she was, and that this earth around and about them was no fair shadowland, in which the miracles of love may triumph over the hard facts of destiny.

'You forget yourself, Mr. Challoner,' she said quietly, slipping from his encircling arm, which loosened and released her readily enough.

Yes, for an instant he had forgotten himself, and Fate, and that dear girl who three months ago had filled his life with gladness by the frank avowal of her love. And now, sitting here in the gloaming, looking into those dark eyes, hearing that low thrilling voice, the love of his boyhood and his youth seemed to him as a bondage and a slavery, from which death would be a cheap deliverance.

'Yes, I have been brought back to the thought of my old life,' pursued Elizabeth, with quiet gravity, 'and of what I was before Lady Lucille saved me—of how I spoke, and looked, and thought even; for I don't suppose I was any better than other people among whom I lived.'

'You were better: you could never have been like them. You were among them, but not of them,' protested Bruno.

'Well, perhaps, I may have been a little less vulgar than the man I saw to-day.'

'What man?'

'My husband.'

'Your husband!'

'Yes; I am a double-dyed impostor, am I not?' said the girl, with a bitter laugh. 'When Lord Ingleshaw questioned me about my past life, I was afraid to tell him I was

a married woman, for fear he should refuse to let me stay at the Castle, and should want to send me on my way, with a few pounds in my pocket perhaps, to look for my husband; so I told him Tom Brook was my sweetheart.'

'And Tom Brook is your husband?' asked Bruno slowly, as if every syllable cost him an effort.

'Yes.'

'Would it be too much to ask who he is—what manner of man?'

'A scamp—a vagabond—a man who works in stables and cab-yards, but who lives by his wits mostly. He was kind to me once, when everybody else in the world was rough and cruel. When I was lying ill in a garret, alone all day long—for the girls who shared my room were out at the factories where they worked—Tom Brook came to look after me; brought me a couple of oranges, or a bunch of grapes, when my lips were parched with fever; sat beside me and talked to me; and I was grateful to him. He was the first man who ever treated me kindly. Even such rough kindness as his was sweet—it was so new. When I got better he followed me about, and wanted to be my sweetheart. Once, when a man was rude to me in the street—one Saturday night—the kind of man we used to call a swell, Tom Brook knocked him down. On Sundays he used to come to tea with the other girls and me, and used to take us for walks, and give us coffee or ices at the little Italian shops round about. Sometimes he took me to the play; and then one morning he told me that he'd got the City missionary to speak to the parson, and that the banns had been given out for the last three Sundays, and he and I were to be married. We went straight to the church with the missionary, who gave me away, and signed the book in the vestry. He was a good old man, and I should have been a better woman if I had listened better to his teaching, and tried to read my Bible; but perhaps, if you knew what life is like in the alley where I lived, you wouldn't wonder that I didn't do it.'

'And so you became Mrs. Thomas Brook,' said Bruno, in biting tones. His whole nature seemed hardened by the idea of this marriage. 'I hope you were happy in your domestic relations.'

'Happy! Well, I had some one who belonged to me—a strong arm to knock down anybody who tried to insult me. I wasn't quite such a forlorn creature as I had been; but I

was a slave, and I had a hard master. When he was sober he made me wait upon him hand and foot; when he was drunk he beat me. When he got tired of his work, and the kind of life he was leading, he left me—left me at the very time when I had most need of his kindness, for I was lying at death's door in the infirmary at the Union. You know what happened to me when I came out of the Union.'

'How did he come here to-day?'

'He heard of me at the village inn, and waited about here to see me.'

'Did he want to take you away with him?'

'No; but he says he shall claim me by-and-by, when he is better off. O, Mr. Challoner, can he claim me—has he the power to take me away with him?'

'He is your husband. That is a position of some strength; and no doubt you are fond of him. You would not refuse to share his home and his fortunes.'

'I would kill myself sooner than acknowledge any right of his over me.'

The pale, steadfast face, the light in the fixed eyes, told that this was no empty threat.

Bruno sighed heavily, and sat staring at the ground.

'Yet you liked him once,' he said meditatively—'liked him well enough to marry him.'

'That was when I was in utter darkness, God help me!—when I thought he was better than other men—just as a man set upon by wolves would hail a dog as his friend. Those other men I knew were like wolves.'

'Poor soul, poor soul!' sighed Bruno. 'Well, I'll tell Lord Ingleshaw your pitiful story, and he will help you to keep this husband of yours at a distance. You should have told his lordship the truth in the first instance. It would have been better.'

'Yes, I know that now. I was too cowardly then to tell the truth: but now I would sooner cut my tongue out than tell Lord Ingleshaw a lie.'

'That's well, Elizabeth. God meant you to be noble and stanch and loyal—God made you brave as well as beautiful. And now you had best hurry home before it grows dark. Shake hands. Don't be afraid. I was a madman just now; but all that is past and gone. We both mean to be true.'

He held out his hand—they two standing face to face in the autumn twilight—and she put her hand into his. Both

hands were deadly cold, but they clasped each other with a clasp that meant self-respect, loyalty to Lucille, and that highest of all human virtues—a stern adherence to difficult duty. And thus they parted; Elizabeth walking quickly back to the Castle; Bruno lighting another cigarette, and sauntering further into the darkness of the wood.

CHAPTER VI.

A LONELY LIFE.

'Kisse me, quod she, we be no longer wrothe.'

It was quite dark before Elizabeth arrived at the Castle, and the long range of windows on the first floor shone with the soft light of lamps and wax-candles, and here and there the ruddier glow of a fire. It looked like that fairy castle which Elizabeth had read of in those familiar tales of witch and goblin that had been her easy introduction to the realm of poetic literature. A pleasant place to live in—a happy and wonderful house, as compared with that dim dwelling in the gloom of a fetid alley to which Elizabeth had been wont to return at this season last year. Yet, such a strange intangible thing is happiness that she went back to that old historic mansion with a heart as heavy as that she had carried to her lodging in the London slum. She had learnt the mystery of new pains and sorrows, new needs and longings, which reached beyond the region of every-day wants. She had known the pangs of Lazarus, and in the days of her poverty had envied the rich, thinking it impossible for them to suffer; and now she knew that Dives has his gnawing canker, his troubled slumbers, his sorrowful dreams, as well as Lazarus.

Elizabeth went round by the stable-yard on her way to the Castle, not caring to enter by that imposing doorway which would bring her face to face with the porter and the groom of the chambers. She wanted to go in without being seen by any one, if it were possible. There was a small door in a turret, which opened on a winding stair that led up to the corridor close to Tompion's rooms, and towards this door Elizabeth directed her steps. She passed two men standing near the yard-gates, in confidential conversation; and she hurried on with fluttering heart and quickened steps, for one of those men was Tom Brook. She scarcely drew breath till she was in her own little room, inside Tompion's; and then she sat down with a beating heart, and began to wonder what Brook and the groom could have found to talk about, and whether she was the subject of their conversa-

tion. She felt that Brook's presence in the stable-yard meant evil to her—that he was dogging her footsteps with some malicious intent, in spite of his promise not to interfere with her good fortune. She had defied him, when it would perhaps have been wiser to conciliate him; but for her very life she could not have cringed to him, or affected any regard for him. If he was to be her foe, she must bear his enmity. Better that than his friendship.

She received a summons to the library soon after breakfast next morning; and, for the second time in her life, she found herself alone with Lord Ingleshaw. He had heard her story from Bruno. He reproved her gently for her want of candour about Tom Brook.

'You told me a falsehood,' he said, 'when truth would have served your purpose much better: and I hardly know whether I ought to believe you now.'

'You may believe me, my lord,' she answered, looking at him with such pathetic earnestness that he could not find it in his heart to doubt her. 'Think what a lost ignorant creature I was when I first stood in this room, face to face with you, as I stand to-day. I scarcely knew right from wrong. But since that day your daughter has taught me a great deal. She has taught me to read the Gospel, and to believe in it and love it. She has taught me my duty to God and man.'

'If you have learned as much as that in less than six months, you have learned more than many of our greatest philosophers have compassed in a lifetime,' said Lord Ingleshaw, smiling at her earnestness. 'Well, Elizabeth, if this husband of yours is a brute, you shall not be forced to live with him; I'll answer for that. So go about your daily work with a contented spirit, and fear nothing.'

'Thank you, my lord. I will try to be worthy of your kindness,' the girl answered meekly. 'But there is one thing I ought to tell you. Tom Brook was in the stable-yard last night, talking to one of the grooms. I saw him as I came in. I don't know that he had any evil intention; but I thought I ought to tell you.'

'Quite right. To which of the men was he talking?'

'I believe it was Compton, my lord.'

'Very good; I'll speak to Compton. When you told me this Tom Brook was your sweetheart, you said he was an honest lad, and had never been in prison. Was that true?'

'Quite true that he was never in prison, my lord, to my knowledge. But he had companions and friends that I

didn't like. Some of them had been in prison. The men who hang about a horsedealer's yard——'

'Are not the noblest members of our race,' interrupted his lordship; 'I am quite sure of that. But you have no reason to suppose that your husband belonged to the criminal classes—that he had ever been concerned in a burglary?'

'No, my lord.'

'That will do.'

Elizabeth curtsied and withdrew, and Lord Ingleshaw went out to the stables, inspected his stud, and took occasion, *en passant*, to interrogate Compton, who was either very stupid or very artful, and could give no further account of his interview with Tom Brook than that he had been standing at the yard-gate, and the man had asked him to direct him back to the village. He had lost his way in the park, and did not know how to regain the high-road, which, from the geography of the place, showed a curious lack of intelligence on the part of the inquirer.

Time passed, and nothing more was seen or heard of Tom Brook. Elizabeth pursued her studies—improved herself in a plain English education, and in the use of the needle and sewing-machine—in the peaceful solitude of Tompion's sitting-room. It ought to have been a life of placid and perfect contentment for one whose earlier years had been full of toil and trouble; but, if Elizabeth May was happy, her physical nature did not thrive upon happiness. Her cheeks grew hollow, and the only colour that ever came into them now was a hectic flush, which glowed and faded with every sudden emotion. Her eyes had a feverish light, and the tall graceful figure, which had rounded to womanly perfection in the summer, had now fallen away to palpable attenuation.

Tompion complained of Elizabeth's daintiness, and made it an offence in this young person that she had not a better appetite for the liberal fare of Ingleshaw Castle.

'It's always the way,' said Tompion, waxing confidential over the tea-tray in the housekeeper's room. 'Set a beggar on horse-back, and we all know where he'll ride. It makes me angry to see her dinner sent away, just mucked about a bit, but none of it eaten.'

'Perhaps she is ill,' suggested Mrs. Prince, the housekeeper, who was a fat kindly creature, and meant well to everybody, so long as no one wanted to dig her out of her armchair.

'Lor', no; she's well enough. It's nothing but airs and graces,' retorted Tompion. 'She's in the sulks because Lady Lucille don't take so much notice of her now that she's got her aunt and Mr. Challoner to occupy her time.'

'And the poor thing feels being taken up for pastime, and then let drop again,' said the housekeeper. 'Well, I don't much wonder at that; I shouldn't like it myself.'

'*You* wouldn't, of course, Mrs. Prince; no more should I,' replied Tompion, with a dignified air; 'but such dirt as that oughtn't to be particular. She ought never to have been brought into such a house as this; but, being brought in through my young lady's mistaken kindness, she ought to be too thankful for all that's done for her. Nursery governess, indeed! a pretty kind of person to teach gentlefolks' children! You should have seen the rags I took off her back the day Lady Lucille found her.'

'They were clean,' said the housekeeper; that's something to her credit. And I must say she has a natural gentility about her that has often made me wonder—and that quick at learning! Miss Marjorum says she never met her equal.'

'Miss Marjorum is an old fool,' protested Tompion, purple with jealousy, 'and so fond of teaching that she would teach a cow, if there was nothing else in the way to be taught.'

'She never taught you, Tompion,' said the chief butler, grinning.

'I should think not, indeed!' ejaculated the damsel, with a contemptuous toss of her head; 'I should like to see her take such a liberty! Old Marjorum knows her place better than that.'

Elizabeth, disliked by the servants, and left to her own resources by Lady Lucille, led a life that was passing lonely; and it is not in solitude that weak humanity can best cure those inward fevers which fret the nerves and consume the soul. In Byron's familiar phrase, Elizabeth was eating her own heart in that dull and placid life at Ingleshaw. On many an October afternoon, as she wandered far afield in her solitary walk, she had thought it would have been better for her to be toiling with yonder rough and noisy hop-pickers, resting after the long day's labour amongst that rough herd under the stars, with a stone for her pillow, like Jacob, than to live in the lap of luxury at Ingleshaw Castle.

Yet there were moments when she felt a thrill of pride and delight at realising the change in herself, physical, mental,

moral, remembering what she had been, and seeing what she was. Once, when she had dusted the china and arranged the flowers in Lady Lucille's dressing-room, she paused for a minute, startled by her own reflection in the cheval-glass—the tall slim figure, the neatly-fitting gown, the refined look, the graceful carriage.

'I don't think any one would know I had been picked up out of the dirt,' she said to herself, proud of her own beauty, which had acquired the crowning charm of refinement. And yet the glory of freshness and colour was gone, and it looked a fragile fading beauty, as of one doomed to an early grave.

One day Lucille was struck by the change in her *protégée*, and questioned her closely about her health. Elizabeth would not admit that she was ill. She owned to feeling tired sometimes, and to sleeping badly; and that was all. Lucille was kinder to her, more friendly and familiar, that day than she had been for a long time.

'Mrs. Raymond is going to Brighton with her children soon after Christmas,' said Lucille. 'It would be nice for you to go with her, and get accustomed to the family and to your new duties. The change of air would do you good. I believe it is change you want.'

Mrs. Raymond was the wife of Lord Ingleshaw's land-steward—a bright pleasant little woman, who had shown some interest in Elizabeth's history, and had volunteered, knowing that history, to take her as nursery governess for her young brood, so soon as Elizabeth should be competent for the post.

'I am not a bit afraid of her antecedents,' said Mrs. Raymond, 'for, as my children and their governess are hardly ever out of my sight, I cannot very well be taken in. I shall be able to read Elizabeth like an open book before she has been with me a fortnight.'

Elizabeth accepted this future engagement with Mrs. Raymond as her fate, allotted to her by the benefactress to whom she owed everything. She had been introduced to Mrs. Raymond's three chubby daughters and one chubby son, the youngest of the brood, and talked of everywhere emphatically as 'the baby,' a proud distinction which he merited in somewise by being the fattest and healthiest two-year-old infant in the parish of Ingleshaw. Elizabeth was not fond of children; but she was constrained to admit that, as children go, Mrs. Raymond's offspring were favourable specimens. They were pictures of health and cleanliness,

always prettily and sensibly clad, amiable and sociable in their manners, and with more than the average amount of intelligence. Elizabeth felt that if her life was to be spent with children, it could hardly be better spent than in the Raymond nursery. Mrs. Raymond had always treated her with particular friendliness; while Mr. Raymond was one of those delightful and easy-going husbands who are only at home at meal-times. He passed his days in a light dog-cart, driving about the Ingleshaw estate, or going journeys in quest of prize cattle.

Elizabeth was touched by Lady Lucille's interest in her health; but the idea of a change to Brighton had no exhilarating effect upon her.

'You'd like to go, wouldn't you?' asked Lucille, vexed at her indifference. 'Brighton is a charming winter place—so gay and smart, and with such lovely shops. You have never seen anything like it. Wouldn't you be pleased if Mrs. Raymond could manage to take you?'

'I don't care about it—much,' faltered Elizabeth. 'But of course I would go if you wished it, Lady Lucille.'

'What wish can I have about it, except for your sake?' exclaimed Lucille, provoked at a coldness which seemed inexplicable: 'you seem to care for nothing, to be interested in nothing.'

'Yes, yes, I do care for something, with all my heart,' cried Elizabeth eagerly, falling on her knees and clasping Lucille's hands and kissing them passionately. 'I care for you. I want you to love me and trust me as you did once—before—'

'Before what?' asked Lucille, looking down at her with intent questioning eyes.

The two women looked into each other's faces, as if their two souls were giving up their secrets, each to each.

'Before that night on the yacht, when I was weak and wicked, and complained to Mr. Challoner of my fate—I who had so much reason to be grateful to Providence and to you. I have grown wiser since then, Lady Lucille. I have learned to govern my jealous temper, to be thankful for the blessings of my life; and when I am with Mrs. Raymond I mean to work very hard, and to be one of the best governesses children ever had.'

'I believe it is in your power to be anything you like,' said Lucille, touched by her earnestness, and ready to repent of that half-defined suspicion which had turned her heart from Elizabeth.

She raised the girl from her knees and kissed her, for the first time in her life.

'If ever I forget that kiss or am unworthy of it, let me be remembered as Judas was remembered,' said Elizabeth; and from this time her intercourse with Lady Lucille resumed much of its original friendliness, to Tompion's inexpressible disgust.

This happened in December, when the park and chase were white with snow, and the drifts were lying deep in all the hollows. Inside the Castle all was warmth and brightness, wood-fires glowing on the wide old hearthstones, and the brazen dogs glittering and flashing in the firelight, while the odours of hot-house flowers, roses, mignonette, hyacinths, lilies of the valley, were intensified by the warmth of the rooms.

'The last snow I remember changed to mud and slush half an hour after it fell,' said Elizabeth, 'and the last cold winds I remember seemed to blow straight at my bones. Winter means quite a different thing for the rich from what it means for the poor.'

The poor were not forgotten by Lucille in that hard weather. She was full of thought for them, full of anxiety to help them. She made Elizabeth her assistant in all her charities, and the girl's knowledge of the needs of the poor, their ways, their prejudices even, was of much use to her young mistress. Elizabeth was indefatigable in trudging from cottage to cottage, in visiting the sick. She sat up for several nights with a girl who was dying of consumption, and nursed her as if she had been a sister. Her conduct was so excellent at this period that Lucille put aside that old painful suspicion as an unworthy doubt, and gave Elizabeth her complete confidence. Bruno was absent at this time on an electioneering expedition to a borough in the North of England, with Lord Ingleshaw, and Lucille had leisure to devote herself to the care of her poor. She had cared for them and ministered to them from her childhood upwards; but just now, at the approach of Christmas she had special duties to perform. And she wished this particular Christmastide to be a golden memory for all the poor in Ingleshaw parish, inasmuch as her own cup of joy was full to overflowing.

Nothing had been heard of Tom Brook since that October twilight, and Elizabeth began to think of her interview with him almost as if it had been a bad dream. It belonged to the past, and had brought no evil consequences.

She seemed happier—nay, she was happier—now than

she had been for a long time. Restored to her benefactress's favour, and able to make herself useful as Lucille's almoner, winning many a blessing from the sick and the aged whom her daily visits cheered and comforted, she no longer felt that life was blank and empty. Bruno's absence was a relief to her. She was no longer troubled by the dread of meeting him suddenly in the corridor or in the garden; she was no longer startled by the sound of his voice in the distance. Her life was more peaceful without that disturbing element. But he was to return for Christmas, and Christmas was drawing near.

Lady Carlyon had departed to another of her happy hunting-grounds—a fine old abbey in the Midlands, at which Christmas was kept in a much more fashionable and festive manner than at Ingleshaw; where the greatest excitement provided for that season was the tea for the mothers, aunts, and school-children, and the supper for the men and youths in the great mediæval hall. At the Abbey there were to be amateur theatricals and a fancy ball. Lady Carlyon was full of plans for her costume for the ball—which was to be wonderfully effective, and to cost a mere nothing—and she had an idea of performing in one of the plays, if people were very pressing. She went away in the highest spirits, pledging herself to return at least a week before the wedding.

'Every detail of your trousseau is arranged,' she said. 'I can leave with an easy conscience.'

When she was gone Lucille resumed all her old girlish habits, read Italian with Miss Marjorum, practised a great deal, rambled in the park, visited in the village, and made a companion of Elizabeth. Mrs. Raymond and her babies came to afternoon tea in the old schoolroom, in order that Elizabeth—Miss May, as the steward's wife called her—might get used to her future charges. Altogether, it was a social and happy time; and when Elizabeth thought of her position and her surroundings a year ago, and of the drunken brawling which was the only distinguishing mark of the Christmas season in Ramshackle Court, she lifted up her heart in thankfulness for the blessed change.

'There is something very sweet about that girl,' said Mrs. Raymond to Lucille, after tea, when Elizabeth had retired to the corridor to play hide-and-seek with Dotty, Totty, Lotty, and the fat baby. 'I really think you found a pearl that day in the wood, Lady Lucille.'

'Yes,' answered Lucille, with a faint sigh; 'I know that she has a noble nature. She is so self-sacrificing, so good to

the poor. And yet there is a mystery about her which sometimes worries me. I can't quite understand her.

'Dear Lady Lucille, the noblest natures are apt to have hidden depths,' answered Mrs. Raymond; 'and one must consider this girl's bringing up. I daresay there are times when the memory of old unhappiness weighs her down—makes her irritable, perhaps. And then she has not a relative in the world. She may feel her loneliness more than we suppose, seeing other people with so many ties. I shall do my best to make her happy when she comes to me; but it will be a great change from the Castle to the Dower House.'

Mr. and Mrs. Raymond occupied a charming old house near the park-gates, which in former days had been the portion of the dowagers of Ingleshaw; but which the more frisky dowagers of the present era would have voted the abomination of desolation. It was a roomy, rambling, half-timbered edifice, smothered with roses planted by an old-world dowager, and set in the midst an idyllic garden and orchard.

'I think Elizabeth will be ever so much happier at the Dower House than she is here,' said Lucille. 'She will have more to do, and a more settled position.'

'Well, here I grant she is a little like Mahomet's coffin, suspended between heaven and earth,' assented Mrs. Raymond laughingly. 'She will have a livelier life with us; for Totty, Dotty, and Lotty are most amusing children. They really do say such extraordinary things that one can never feel dull in their company,' pursued the fond parent. 'They are so witty that I sometimes catch myself wondering that I can be their mother. And I'm sure they don't inherit their comic ideas from George, for one has to go over a joke three times to make him understand it.'

Being so well disposed towards Elizabeth, Mrs. Raymond readily consented to take her to Brighton with the children, when they went there for their winter holiday; so it was settled that Miss May's duties were to begin at that time, and her association with Ingleshaw Castle, save as an occasional visitor to her benefactress, would then come to an end.

Bruno and Lucille were to be married on the 20th of January, at which time Mrs Raymond and her family would be still at Brighton. The Raymonds had not been invited to the wedding, which was to be attended by none but relations, with the single exception of Miss Marjorum, who almost ranked as a relation.

CHAPTER VII.

NOT DISLOYAL.

'Irene, I have loved you, as men love
Light, music, odour, beauty, love itself;
Whatever is apart from, and above,
Those daily needs which deal with dust and pelf.'

'CHRISTMAS is coming and Bruno,' exclaimed Lucille, on the morning of Christmas-eve, as she worked with Miss Marjorum, Tompion, and Elizabeth May at the decoration of hall, staircase, and corridor. Lord Ingleshaw objected to holly and ivy in the rooms in which he lived—clocks and lamps and picture-frames embowered in greenery gave him an uncomfortable feeling.

'Make the hall and corridor as festive as you please, my dear,' he said, 'but don't let me see a Madonna by Guido staring at me like an owl out of an ivy-bush, or my Sèvres china made a mere vehicle for the exhibition of holly-berries.'

'It may be vulgar, old-fashioned, Philistine,' said Lucille, as she twisted an elaborate wreath of variegated ivies and glittering red berries round the massive oaken newel at the head of the staircase; 'but I should like Bruno to feel that it is Christmas-time directly he enters the Castle.'

Lucille and her three assistants worked with good-will, from breakfast to a late luncheon; and among them they contrived to make the old hall, the wide shallow staircase, and long low corridor delightfully suggestive of Christmas-tide in the olden time. The polished oak panelling made such a good background, the many-coloured lights from the painted window at the end of the corridor so helped and heightened the effect.

The Earl and Bruno, who were coming from the North that day, were not expected until dusk. It would be afternoon tea-time before they could arrive, the most delightful time at which to welcome them. Lucille's morning-room was glorious with hot-house flowers, bright with the soft red firelight, tempered by a ground-glass screen. The quaint little tables—Queen Anne, Japanese, Dundee—were daintily

arranged by Lucille's own hands. Each low luxurious chair was in its most appropriate place ; the fair young *châtelaine* was looking her loveliest in a dark-blue velvet gown, all slashed and puffed with deepest red, and with a red satin petticoat just peeping below the dark-blue of the skirt. It was one of Lucille's trousseau gowns ; and Tompion had told her that it was very unlucky to wear it—a tampering with futurity, which must result in something awful ; but Lucille was bent upon looking her very best when Bruno and she met, after an agonising separation of nearly three weeks. The gown fitted her as never gown had fitted her before; and she stood in front of the cheval-glass innocently admiring herself.

'Well, Lady Lucille, it *do* give you a figure ' exclaimed Tompion ; ' but, for all that, I shouldn't like to wear it if I was you, I should feel I was flying in the face of Fate.'

'I don't think Fate will take any notice of my new gown,' said Lucille, pirouetting lightly, just to see the effect of the dark-blue stocking and the Queen Anne shoe. 'And I want Mr. Challoner to be pleased. What is my finery meant for except to please him?'

'No, Lady Lucille, that's not it,' protested Tompion, with a superior air. 'Your trousseau is to do credit to your position as his lordship's only daughter. That's what you've got to study.'

'I shall study nothing except my husband's happiness,' answered Lucille ; 'and I hope that's what you mean to do, Tompion, when you are married.'

Tompion breathed a despondent sigh.

'I never can bear to think of my marriage,' she said ; 'for when I marry, you'll be having some stuck-up French maid who'll want you to paint your lips and pencil your eyebrows.'

'No, she won't, Tompion ; at least, she won't make such a suggestion a second time, I can assure you.'

Tompion's marriage, which had been talked of for the last six years, had again been deferred unconditionally ; and Lucille was to enter upon her new state encumbered with an old servant.

Lucille waited for the returning travellers alone in the winter gloaming, Miss Marjorum having discreetly gone to afternoon tea at the Vicarage. She sat a little way from the shaded hearth with an unheeded book in her lap, listening for the ring of wheels and horses' hoofs upon the frost-bound road. There it was at last; and then a sonorous peal

at the big bell. Should she go to meet them? Had it been her father alone who was returning, she would have flown to the hall, and would have been in his arms before he could take off his overcoat. Had it been the Bruno of old days, she would have run to the head of the staircase to give him a laughing welcome. But a new sense of shyness restrained the betrothed bride. She waited by the fireside, with her heart beating fast and her colour coming and going, like the light and shadow on a rose that sways to and fro in the wind.

'Well, little lady, here you are at last!' said Lord Ingleshaw, as he and Bruno came into the firelight, bringing the frosty outdoor atmosphere with them. 'What a deathlike quiet there is in the house—almost like coming into a tomb!'

'Is that all the praise Lucille is to get for her Christmas decorations?' asked Bruno, when he and his betrothed had kissed, and she stood shyly at his side, hardly daring to look up at his face. 'I thought the hall and staircase looked lovely.'

'It all had a goblin air, to my mind,' said the Earl, 'such unearthly stillness.'

'Dear father, you forget how quiet the Castle always is,' said Lucille.

'Of course he does,' exclaimed Bruno. 'His lordship is demoralised by a great bustling hotel in a manufacturing city, where the waiters have as many different tongues as stopped the works at Babel, and where eager-looking Americans are always rushing in and out of the coffee-room. For my part, I am charmed to get back to the quiet of the fairy castle; and I should be content to be snow-bound here until—until my wedding-day.'

He drew Lucille a little nearer to him as he spoke, the twilight favouring such gentle caresses. He had come back to Ingleshaw determined to be very happy, to value to the uttermost this treasure of a pure and lovely woman's love which Providence had given to him. What could he ever have better in life than this perfect blessing, this constant incentive to good deeds and holy thoughts, this perpetual inspiration, this second conscience walking at his side and guiding his steps, and always pointing upward?

'Look at him, Lucille! You see before you the member for the North-Eastern division of Smokeshire,' said the Earl, laying his hand on Bruno's shoulder. 'How does he carry his dignity? Do you think he has grown?'

'Miss Marjorum will be sure to say so,' answered Lucille, laughing; 'or, at any rate, she will declare that he has expanded.'

'His pockets have had to expand considerably, I can assure you,' said her father. 'Now that legislation has done its uttermost to insure the incorruptibility of electors, elections are just a little more expensive than they were in the days of rank rottenness. The voters are just as greedy, and they are not half so candid.'

'Have you ever observed anything of the professional beauty about me, Lucille?' asked Bruno.

'Well, not exactly.'

'Yet I assure you there was as much eagerness to photograph me as if I had been the Lily herself. All the local photographers fell upon me like a pack of hounds. They told me it was customary for the member to be photographed; and it was furthermore customary for him to have his photograph enlarged by a twenty-guinea process, and provided with a handsome frame. The high-souled creatures would have scorned to accept a sixpence in the beaten way of bribery; but they all wanted to run me in for forty pounds' worth of photography. And this was only typical of the general sentiments.'

'But why didn't you order the photographs?' asked Lucille naïvely. 'I should have been enchanted to have them.'

'What! six or seven enlarged *me's?* There are at least as many photographers in Billingford. No, I refused to yield to the charmers—first, because it would have been the encouragement of cool impudence; and, secondly, because it would have been indirect bribery.'

'But if you looked at things in such a Roman manner, and steadfastly refused to bribe, how was it you spent so much money?' asked Lucille, much puzzled.

'Ah, how indeed? You see, I had an agent.'

'And he bribed for you?'

'He spent the money—on electioneering expenses. But now I am a member of the British Senate, and I am going to set about righting the wrongs of the universe. Is not that a great privilege?"

'I am very proud to think your talents will be of use in the world,' said Lucille, seeing him, in the middle-distance of life, as Prime Minister. 'But members of Parliament are never at home of an evening, are they?' she added regretfully.

'O, we must try to get the early closing movement adopted at St. Stephen's. We ought, at any rate, to have our Wednesday evenings and our Saturday afternoons, like the counter-jumpers in small country towns.'

A footman brought in lamps, while another brought the tea-tray; and Lucille's attention for the next five minutes was occupied with the delight of pouring out tea for the two people she loved best in the world. The shaded lamp gave only a subdued light, so she was not afraid of her happiness being too much in evidence. The sweet young face beamed with happy smiles; the soft blue eyes were luminous with delight.

'What a delicious thing in frocks!' said Bruno, sitting down close to her, on a capacious saddle-bag ottoman, and touching the velvet with the tips of his fingers. 'Your Maidstone dressmaker is improving. There is a bold effect in those crimson slashings against dark blue, which does credit to our county town.'

'I am sorry to say this is not a Maidstone gown. It is Madame Muntzowski's.'

'Indeed! Some other local genius! Sittingbourne, perhaps, or Sevenoaks?'

'Oh, Bruno! Madame Muntzowski is the new Polish dressmaker in Bruton Street.'

'She may live in Park Lane for aught I care, so long as she preserves the knack of making you look so entrancingly lovely!'

Lord Ingleshaw had ensconced himself in the deepest and softest of the plush-covered armchairs. He had set down his empty cup already, and was half asleep, basking in the warmth and perfume, after a long cold railway journey. The lovers could talk what nonsense they pleased. Bruno had not felt so happy for ever so long as he felt this evening.

It seemed to him as if the old fresh sweet feelings had returned to him; those unspeakable feelings which had made the commencement of his courtship like a blissful dream. He had struggled with, and had overcome, that fatal fancy which had so nearly wrecked his happiness. He had fought against that strange and unhealthy fascination which had made Elizabeth May's image a haunting thought by day and night. He knew that he had been on the threshold of hideous falsehood and wrong, and he had recoiled horror-stricken at the idea of his own infamy.

Lord Ingleshaw slumbered for nearly an hour in that

comfortable plush-lined nest by the fire, lulled by the low murmur of loving voices, as by the sound of falling waters on a summer noontide. Lucille and her lover could have talked to each other for hours. He was full of his electioneering experiences, of great plans for the future; measures of all kinds for the enlightenment and happiness of his fellow-men; measures which he was going to get passed in the very teeth of prejudice and opposition, fighting as St. George fought the dragon, as Macaulay fought for Catholic Emancipation.

'How proud I shall be of your victories!' said Lucille; 'and I am sure that no one can stand up against you. Eloquence like yours will overcome everything.'

'Ah, my dearest, it is so easy to talk by this fireside, with one sweet sympathetic listener. I shall seem a very different man, to myself even, at Westminster, with some facetious member of the Opposition crowing like a cock in the midst of my boldest flight of oratory, and my right arm working involuntarily like an automatic pump-handle.'

'No one will crow while you are speaking,' said Lucille, with conviction; 'I know you are a heaven-born statesman, like William Pitt.'

Miss Marjorum came in presently, and found Lord Ingleshaw snoring, and the lovers so deep in talk that they were unconscious of that nasal accompaniment to their conversation. The spinster's entrance dissolved the spell. His lordship started up and declared that he must dress for dinner; Bruno followed his example; and Lucille was left alone with her governess, who was brimming over with the last parish news. Lucille pretended to listen; but she was glad when Miss Marjorum went off to decorate herself for the evening, and left her alone with her happy thoughts. She sat down to the piano, and played her favourite bits of Mozart by memory. How those tender passionate airs, 'Vedrai carino,' 'Batti, batti,' and 'Voi che sapete,' lent themselves to the reveries of love!

The little dinner of four was the gayest thing in dinners. The Earl, refreshed by a warm bath and a careful toilet, had recovered from the effects of his long cold journey. Bruno was in the highest spirits; he talked a great deal about his election, and the humorous aspects of the free and independent citizens of Smokeshire, and Lucille listened with rapture. In the evening they gave themselves up to music, to the delight of Lord Ingleshaw, who loved nothing better than to take his ease in his arm-chair while his daughter sang or

played to him. There were some simple German duets, in which Lucille's voice and her lover's harmonised deliciously —verses all about love and flowers, and stars, and eventide. Bruno had one of those sympathetic baritone voices which are at their best in such music, and Lucille's fresh young mezzo-soprano sounded as untutored and free as the carolling of a bird.

Lady Carlyon, who valued music merely as an addition to a young woman's society charms, had urged the necessity for lessons from an Italian master, in order that a more brilliant and striking effect might be obtained.

'When I was young all the girls sang "Una voce." Why does not Lucille sing "Una voce"?' she inquired; 'those little things of Mozart's are all very well before she is out; but in society I should like to hear her do something better.'

'In society I shall hold my tongue, auntie,' Lucille answered, laughing. 'People who can have Patti or Nilsson at their parties won't want my little pipe.'

'Not on state occasions, perhaps; but amateur concerts are very much in vogue, and I should like my niece to be able to distinguish herself. You ought to compose an occasional thing too, — a gavotte, or a setting for one of Heine's ballads; it looks well.'

This had been said before Lucille's engagement, but after her fate was settled the dowager became less exacting.

'You will have plenty of money, and you will be the future Countess of Ingleshaw,' she said; 'so you can do as you like. Very few girls jump into their independence so easily.'

'Isn't it good of Bruno?' asked Lucille, smiling.

'Bruno could not have done better for himself,' replied Lady Carlyon; 'he understands perfectly what is good for him.'

This was one of those speeches that wound, like the feathery air-blown darts of a South American savage; so slight and light a thing, and yet so deadly. But now Lucille had forgotten her worldly-minded aunt's caustic speech and freezing philosophy. Bruno was restored to her, as tender and as true as he had been in the first days of their engagement. Once in the course of the evening she found herself wondering whether he had any curiosity about Elizabeth May; whether he knew she was still in the house, or concerned himself about her in any way.

By one of those coincidences which seem like magnetism,

Lord Ingleshaw began to talk about Elizabeth in the next moment.

'How is Lucille's *protégée?*' he asked, addressing himself to Miss Marjorum, who sat by the fire knitting a comforter. Miss Marjorum knitted comforters for all the gaffers and goodies in the parish. 'Still grinding away at the three R's?'

'If you mean reading, writing, and arithmetic, she conquered those three months ago. Rhetoric, rhythm, and Roman history would answer better for her present studies,' replied Miss Marjorum, pompously. 'All I can say is, I never had such a pupil—such application, such tenacity of purpose, and such an acute intelligence. I suppose the poor creature feels that, for her, education is a matter of life or death, just the one thing that can raise her out of the Slough of Despond in which she was born and bred.'

'I am very glad to hear such a good account of her,' said the Earl. 'I was rather afraid that my daughter's imitation of the good Samaritan would entail no end of trouble on all of us. You are not tired of your *protégée*, Lucille?'

'No, father, I am delighted to have been able to help—to help her to so good a friend as Miss Marjorum, that is to say,' said Lucille, with a loving look at her old governess, 'for it is to her careful teaching Elizabeth owes most. 'Mrs. Raymond is quite charmed with her, and has engaged her as nursery governess. I know she will be happy at the Dower House.'

'No doubt of that,' replied Lord Ingleshaw; 'Mrs. Raymond is one of the best little women I know.'

During this conversation Lucille's eyes had almost unconsciously watched Bruno's face. He sat in the full light of the lamp, turning over the leaves of a Doré Tennyson, as if in sheer emptiness of mind. His eyes were on the pictures as he slowly turned them over. If Elizabeth's name had power to quicken the beating of his heart, no quiver of brow or lip betrayed that influence. A marble image could not have been calmer than that broad open brow and that finely-moulded mouth. Yet this calmness cost Bruno Challoner no light effort. He had conquered the dangerous feeling which Elizabeth had aroused in him; but he had not forgotten her, and the memory of her was full of pain.

It was a relief, or it ought to have been a relief, to know that her future was comfortably provided for; that sh would be sheltered in a home where her husband coul scarcely venture to persecute her. There would, of course

always be the danger of his claiming her, so long as the marriage-tie remained unbroken; but it was probable that a man of that stamp would put himself out of court by leading an immoral life, and that there might be a judicial separation by-and-by. All this was satisfactory, so far as Elizabeth was concerned; and it was undoubtedly a comfort to know that she had overcome any fatal *penchant*—betrayed so artlessly, yet with such impassioned looks, such thrilling tones, that night on board the yacht. Yes, all this was comfort, and knowing that it was so, Bruno wondered that his heart should wax heavy, his pulses throb tumultuously, at the very mention of this girl's name.

He closed the book suddenly, and looked up at Lucille. That sweet fair face was turned to him, the soft blue eyes seeking his with vague pathetic entreaty, as if she said, 'Think of me, and of me only; lean on me; be true to me. 'Yes, dear one,' he answered inwardly, 'I will be true; I will hold fast by your love; and all will be well with us both in the end.'

At eleven o'clock the butler brought in some old-fashioned spiced concoction of hot wine, which was supposed to have a peculiar appropriateness to Christmastide. The tankard that held it and the goblets into which it was poured were nearly three hundred years old—plate that had been buried under old stone urns in the pleasaunce during the Civil War, and had thus escaped that period of general melting-down. Lucille sipped a little of the mulled wine dutifully, not liking it at all, but accepting it as a libation to Father Christmas. Bruno did not scruple to make a wry face at the mixture, declaring that it was like a Mansion House loving-cup warmed up. And then they all drank happiness to each other, and peace and goodwill to all men.

Midnight was striking when Lucille and Miss Marjorum took their candles and retired. Lord Ingleshaw followed immediately, leaving Bruno to find his way to his rooms when he pleased. The young senator was in no hurry to retire. His brain was too highly strung for sleep to be possible yet awhile: so he raked the fading logs together, and sat in front of the low fire musing for nearly an hour before he rose slowly and meditatively, lighted his candle, extinguished the lamps, and went into the corridor.

All was dark outside. Bruno's solitary candle made a faint spot of light upon the darkness of the long corridor, with its pictured faces, and old carved-oak cabinets projecting their bulky forms at intervals in the blank spaces between the doors.

'What a house for burglars!' thought Bruno. This silence and darkness of the small hours is apt to set people thinking of burglars, if they are happily exempt from the necessity of thinking about blackbeetles. 'Why a dozen black-visaged gentlemen might hide behind those cabinets!'

Suddenly, at the farthest end of the long passage, a light shone out of the gloom, like a star. This, at an hour when the whole household was supposed to be hushed in sleep, was alarming. Did that distant light portend a ghost or a burglar?

Bruno advanced boldly to meet the unknown, afraid of neither phantom nor thief, but curious, and with his pulses stirred newly.

As he drew nearer to the figure he saw it was a woman, tall and slender, dressed in black. She was carrying a pile of books in one arm, a candle in the other hand; and she was that one woman whose presence had more power to agitate and disturb Bruno Challoner than any ghostly visitant from the pale dust of dead and gone centuries.

He was not disloyal; he had fought a good fight: yet this woman could never be to him as other women; for in one fatal moment of their lives she had let him understand that she loved him, and was breaking her heart for love of him.

She did not hear his footstep on the thick Axminster carpet, and he was close to her when she looked up suddenly and saw him standing before her. She started and gave a little cry, while the topmost volume of the pile of books held against her breast slipped from under her chin, and all the rest came down after it in a shower.

'I am so sorry,' she faltered, kneeling to pick them up; 'I hope the noise won't wake any one. I was going to take the books back to the library, in case his lordship should want them to-morrow.'

'I'll take them back for you,' said Bruno kindly, and with a commonplace business-like tone which he felt to be worthy of much praise. 'Is it not rather foolish to sit up reading till such a late hour?'

'The time slipped by,' answered Elizabeth meekly. 'I am not a very good sleeper, so I like to get rid of some of the night. The winter nights are so dreadfully long.'

Bruno remembered the time when no night was long enough for him; and the terrible conquest of inclination involved in getting up early, even for such delights as trout-fishing or cub-hunting. Of late his nights had been not always unbroken by long watches of troubled thought.

They were both kneeling, getting the scattered volumes together by the light of the two candles on the floor beside them. Bruno glanced at the titles of the books. They were all poetry—the old-world poets, in sober brown calf livery; a set which the Earl loved and often looked at—Chaucer, Spenser, Surrey, Wyatt, Waller, Herrick, Dryden.

'You have not read all these old fellows, have you?' asked Bruno lightly.

'I only read bits here and there. It is so nice to have ever so many books, and just to dip into one after another.'

'Yes, that is the luxury of reading. I don't suppose it is particularly good for one, any more than a meal of ices and creams at a confectioner's; but it is very nice.'

The pleasant lightness of his tone would have suited a conversation with some young lady in society to whom he had just been introduced, and of whom he knew nothing except that she was there, and that he was expected to be civil to her. Suddenly, as he rose with the pile of books in his arms, he looked for the first time full in Elizabeth May's face, and the revelation which flashed upon him in that one look almost made him drop the books as awkwardly as she had dropped them a few minutes ago.

That which he saw in the too brilliant eyes, the hectic bloom, the pale parted lips, was the stamp of death. Looking at her for a space which might be counted by moments, he saw enough to be terribly certain of her doom. This girl—rescued from fever-haunted alleys and crowded garrets, from dirt and disorder, squalor, horrors of every kind; sheltered and cared for, and surrounded with all the luxuries of refinement—had broken her heart, and was dying of rapid consumption. The fiery sword had worn out the scabbard.

What was it to him that she should so die? Nothing, perhaps; but he knew, he knew! Those vaguely-passionate broken sentences on board the yacht had told him too much. There are some for whom a first impassionate romantic love means triumph or death; and in this case triumph was impossible, and the girl must die.

He thought all this as he stood carefully readjusting the pile of slippery octavos, as if all his energies were absorbed in the one duty of conveying those books safely back to their shelf; and then, glancing at that wan face uneasily, he said—

'You are not looking so well as when I saw you last. I'm afraid you must have been very ill since I left.'

'O no,' she answered lightly; 'I am quite well. I have a rather troublesome cough, and I have bad nights; but there

is nothing the matter with me. Mrs. Raymond is going to take me to Brighton at the beginning of the year, and then I shall get rid of my cough.'

'Has Mr. Wharton seen you?'

'Yes; Lady Lucille insisted upon my seeing him. He gave me some stuff for my cough, and told me to wear warm clothes, and not to study so much. That was all.'

'He is a fool!' said Bruno angrily. 'I should like you—You ought to see a London physician—Jenner, Gull, Clark—somebody who has common sense.'

'That would be a waste of money and trouble. I shall get quite well at Brighton,' the girl answered with conviction.

Bruno was silent for a moment or so; and then, in a lowered voice, he asked—

'Have you heard any more of that man—your husband?'

'No, not a word. I am so thankful for that. I begin to hope that he is not coming here any more. Good-night, Mr. Challoner—if—if you are really going to be so kind as to take those books back to the library for me.'

She made him a curtsy, just as she would have done to the Earl; and then went quickly to her room, the door of which was close by; leaving Bruno to carry the books downstairs, through the dark silent house.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN OLD-FASHIONED CHRISTMAS.

'So are our gentle natures intertwined
With sweet humanities, and closely knit
In kindly sympathy with human kind.'

CHRISTMAS-DAY passed very happily for Lucille, whose fair face was flushed with delight at having her lover at her side once more in the old square pew, where the crimson velvet cushions and footstools had faded almost to a neutral tint in the lapse of a century of Sundays, and where the most modern of the big quarto prayer-books contained a prayer for George and Charlotte, of pious domestic memory. It was a clear frosty morning; not a black frost, by any means, but an ideal Christmas-day—warm in the sunlight, crisply cold in the shade. All the trees looked like fairy-trees, and the lake was crowded with village skaters in the early afternoon. Lucille and Bruno walked to and from church, calling on Mrs. Raymond at the Dower House on their way home.

The children here were full of enquiries about Elizabeth, whom they called Miss May. They liked her so much, they told Bruno. They were always confidential with Bruno, who was a great favourite with them all. They were so glad she was going to be their governess. They meant to be very good, and learn all the lessons she set them; and then she would play hide and-seek and Tom Tiddler with them—she had promised as much. And then they asked Bruno if he knew Tom Tiddler; to which Bruno replied that he had some recollection of having made the gentleman's acquaintance in very early days before he went to Eton.

"But didn't you play at Tom Tiddler's ground at Eton?' inquired Totty, standing close up to Bruno's knee, with her eyes very wide open.

'No. We concentrated all our energies on cricket.'

'Then what a nasty school Eton must be, if they wouldn't let you play Tom Tiddler!'

'Hard lines, wasn't it?' agreed Bruno; 'a T. T. Club

would have been a relaxation from the responsibilities of fielding and bowling.'

'I like cricket,' said Dotty, standing at Bruno's other knee, and speaking in a defiant voice.

'Then you oughtn't!' exclaimed Lotty; 'it's a boys' game, and girls oughtn't to like boys' games.'

Mrs. Raymond at this juncture sent the children into the garden, lest they should become oppressive.

'You are too good to them, Mr. Challoner,' she said; 'and they are such talkative children; they have been allowed to say what they like, and they will express their opinions. Isn't it lucky they are so pleased with Miss May?'

"Yes, that is very fortunate,' answered Bruno coolly, yet wondering all the while why the mere mention of Elizabeth's name should set his heart aching, just as a kindly-meant inquiry about chronic neuralgia will bring on the pain. 'The very name of governess is enough to set some children against the person whom they are asked to receive in that capacity.'

'O, but Miss May is so nice!' said Mrs. Raymond; 'she has no governessish ways. Of course that is only natural, since this is to be her first attempt; but I find her positively charming. No one would imagine her a person of low antecedents; she is one of Nature's jewels.'

'I'm afraid she is very ill,' said Bruno, in a low serious voice. Lucille had been carried off to the garden by the children, to see their snow-man, a colossal figure of heaped-up snow, with a supposed semblance to humanity, carried out and accentuated by an inverted flower-pot, which was meant to represent a hat. 'I saw her last night, by accident, and I was shocked by the change in her. She looks like a person who is going into a decline.'

'O, no, no!' exclaimed Mrs. Raymond cheerfully, 'I am sure there is nothing so serious as that. She has a winter cough, that's all. A fortnight of dear lively Brighton will set her up again.'

'I don't think she ought to go to Brighton,' said Bruno. 'She ought to have the very best advice that London can give, and be sent off to the south of France without an hour's delay.'

'And what is to become of Lotty, Dotty, and Totty?' cried Mrs. Raymond; 'they are so fond of her.'

'Lotty and Dotty can get another governess; but Elizabeth cannot get another life, if she throws away the one Providence has given her,' answered Bruno, waxing stern.

'O Mr. Challoner, surely you cannot think me so selfish as to wish the dear girl to run any risk on my account!' protested Mrs. Raymond, with a grieved look. 'I like her so much, and so do my children. If I thought there were anything serious I should be deeply concerned.'

'I am sure she is seriously ill. I could not be mistaken in her appearance, though I saw her only for a few minutes. I don't want to alarm Lucille—who—who is very sensitive, and very fond of her *protégée*. I know what a sensible practical woman you are, dear Mrs. Raymond, and I want you to take this poor creature in hand. Take her up to London to see a physician the very first day you can; go to the very best man you can—Jenner, I think. Money need be no consideration; I will send you a cheque. But don't let Lucille be made unhappy by knowing how very serious the case is."

'No, no, dear girl; so near her wedding too, when life is full of joy for her.'

'Then I may rely upon your managing this for me?'

'Certainly. Let me see, we could not go to-morrow, Boxing-day—travelling would be impossible; and I suppose even the physicians take a holiday on that day. Shall we go the day after?'

'If you please. It might be best to write to Sir William Jenner by this evening's post, asking for an appointment.'

'Yes, that shall be done.'

They had just time for their talk when Lucille was brought back in triumph by the three chubby little girls, all in new gray velveteen frocks, point lace collars of motherly workmanship, and scarlet sashes. They had shown Lady Lucille all their treasures—snow-man, bantams, rabbits, and a goat which was being broken to harness, not without a tendency on his own part to breaking carriages.

''Ady 'Ucille 'ikes my bunny best,' cried Dotty, the youngest of these graces, who had not yet conquered the letter *l*.

'She says so 'cos you ast her, and she's too polite to say no,' said Totty; 'you didn't ought to have ast.'

'"Ast" and "didn't ought!"' cried Mrs. Raymond; 'that is Phœbe's English. You see how badly we all want a governess.'

'Mother doesn't!' exclaimed Lotty; 'mother knows—O, such lots!'

'Be sure you are all with us before five,' said Lucille, as she took leave of Mrs. Raymond.

There was to be a grand German Christmas-tree for the school-children at five o'clock, and a game at blind man's buff afterwards for the little Raymonds and some other children of the genteel classes, in whom Lucille was interested.

Bruno felt more comfortable in his mind after that little talk with Mrs. Raymond. Elizabeth's face had haunted him, by fits and starts, all through the church service, coming back upon his mind every now and then, in his happier moments, like the memory of a great sorrow which will not let a man rest. He could not bear to think that she should fade and perish before his eyes, and he make no effort to save her. She was nothing, never could be anything, to him; but she had loved him, and for that fact alone she must always be sacred in his thoughts.

Luncheon was almost as merry a meal as dinner had been yesterday. The Vicar and his daughters had been brought to the Castle by the Earl, and they were full of life and spirits.

After luncheon they all walked down to the lake to see the skaters; and Miss Marjorum created some sensation by a new bonnet, which was in the very latest Tunbridge Wells Parisian fashion, but which was better adapted for exhibition in a milliner's window—where one saw it only from an abstract point of view—than for Miss Marjorum's head.

'I didn't like to wear it in the morning,' said Miss Marjorum meekly, when the Vicarage girls had complimented her. 'I thought it might be too conspicuous for a village church.'

'I'm afraid it would have distracted the school-children,' said Emma, the eldest girl.

'And it might have made them discontented with their Dunstables,' said Alice, the second.

Laura, the youngest, was hiding behind her sister, speechless with laughter. That velvet monstrosity, with its ostrich feather, fixed in its place by a sprawling brass lizard, had been too much for her equanimity.

Day was dying when they went back to the Castle, with that pleasant darkness of an early winter evening—stars shining faintly in the dim gray sky, a low streak of golden light slowly fading in the far-off west. Lucille and Bruno walked side by side through the leafless avenue, talking in low voices; while the Vicarage girls skipped on in front of them, prattling gaily with Miss Marjorum. The youngest of the family was nine-and-twenty, but they were spoken o.

everywhere as the Vicarage girls, and will be so spoken of when the youngest is forty. This was not flattery, but a friendly tribute to the inherent girlishness and gushingness of the damsels, a perennial freshness which time could not destroy.

The great hall of the Castle was brilliant with the many-tapered Christmas-tree when they went in. The logs in the wide stone fireplace burnt low, and their red light was obscured by a broad Indian screen, so as to concentrate the effect of those tiny twinkling tapers, which shone upon every spray of the tall yew-tree, one of the gardener's finest specimens, yielded up reluctantly for the occasion. Fairy-like dolls were perched among the branches—dolls in white and silvery raiment, with diadems on their flaxen heads, and wands in their waxen hands; angelic dolls, with golden wings; Watteau dolls, with chintz frocks and beribboned crooks. Other branches drooped heavily with baskets of sweetmeats; cracker-bonbons hung in gorgeous festoons from bough to bough; Tangerine oranges, tiny red apples, showed bright amidst the sombre green; toy watches and coral necklaces hung on every bough. Tompion and Elizabeth, with all the other maids to help them, had been toiling since luncheon to produce this dazzling effect. It was Elizabeth whose deft fingers had dressed the dolls, and made the seraphic wings and fairy wands out of gilt paper. It had pleased her to be thus useful, even with that gnawing pain in her side all the time she worked—that ever-increasing languor which made work so difficult.

As if this marvellous tree—this lovely invention from that land of elves and goblins somewhere under the shadow of the Hartz Mountains—were not enough, there was a wonderful institution called a 'bran-pie,' in a dusky corner of the hall; and into this bran-pie every little hand was to be dipped, to catch what it could amidst the mystery of bran.

The children, gentle and simple, were all flocking into the hall as Bruno and Lucille and the Vicarage girls came in from their walk. Time had flown so swiftly for Lucille.

'Is it really five?' she exclaimed, astonished. 'I never heard it strike four.'

'It's ever so much past five,' cried Totty; 'and you told us to come at five. We've been waiting ages.'

'Totty, what a rude child you are!' exclaimed Mrs. Raymond.

Totty ran to Lucille with the basket full of tickets.

'Please, mayn't we begin to draw?' she asked.

'But when you have all drawn you'll want to pull the tree to pieces,' said Lucille.

'No, I won't; but I should like to be able to look at a doll, and know that it is mine,' answered Totty.

Lots were drawn, and a tall footman unhooked all the dolls and watches and bonbon baskets, which were most accurately distributed, leaving the tree still glorious with its innumerable tapers and festoons of gold and silver. The treasures were shared indiscriminately by gentle and simple. There were no galling distinctions: only Lotty, who was known to be a clever child, was seen to absorb a good many toys by a system of exchange and barter, and by taking toys bodily from stupid open-mouthed infants who had not been educated up to their acquisitions, and relinquished them to any sturdy assailant in sheer helplessness.

Bruno caught a glimpse of Elizabeth May in the distance, among the upper servants, looking flushed, and radiant with an unearthly brightness. She wore some scarlet ribbon about her neck, and a gold locket which Lady Lucille had given her that morning as a Christmas present; and her new black gown fitted her so well as to accentuate her alarming slimness. She looked a mere reed, and a reed that could be easily snapped in twain.

Mrs. Raymond, alarmed by Bruno, took occasion to observe her future governess more closely than she had done hitherto, and she, too, saw ground for apprehension. But she was careful not to scare the patient.

'I don't like that nasty little worrying cough of yours, Miss May,' she said lightly. 'I think I shall take you to London the day after to-morrow to see some kind clever doctor, who will set you all right again before we go to Brighton.'

'I don't think it's worth while,' answered Elizabeth. 'You are all of you too kind to me. I daresay my cough will go of its own accord when the summer comes.'

'No doubt; but that is rather too long to wait. A clever doctor will get rid of it much sooner. Good gracious, what *is* Dotty doing?'

Dotty, the youngest of the three chubby daughters, was fighting the eldest of the Vicarage girls over the ruins of the bran-pie, which Dotty, in her eagerness to explore its inmost treasures, had turned upside down. And now she wanted to have her pick of the scattered contents, an act of marauding which the Vicarage girl would not allow.

'No, no, Dotty; the school-children must have their share,

protested Emma. Whereupon Dotty attacked her with clenched fists—chubby pink paws rolled up into tight little balls of flesh—pummelling her adversary's waistband.

'O, you dreadful child!' cried Mrs. Raymond, snatching up the spoilt darling. 'The Christmas-tree has quite turned her head.'

'I want more toys!' shrieked Dotty, in baby accents; and was led away by Elizabeth, still shrieking, to be restored to composure, and to return, ten minutes afterwards, with washed face, a meek and lamblike image of childhood, to take her place at the tea-table in the long dining-room, where the simple children were entertained at two long tables, and the gentle children at a shorter table placed across the upper end of the room.

Mrs. Raymond, Tompion, and Elizabeth waited on Lucille and the three Vicarage girls, whose pleasing duty it was to go on pouring out tea without intermission for the next hour. When the children had stuffed themselves with cake and buns and bread-and-jam, liquefying that stodgy mixture with warm tea, the tables were cleared and rearranged for the mothers and aunts and elder sisters, who all came to this afternoon entertainment, and for whom there was a second bran-pie, containing ribbons and gloves and Prayer-books and Hymn-books and *Christian Years*. The men were to have a great supper of beef and pudding in the hall at nine o'clock, when the Christmas tree was dead and gone, the tapers all burnt out, and the ill-used conifer restored to the anxious gardener, to be nursed into health and vigour after this frightful shock to its constitution.

The children were playing at blind-man's buff in the hall while the matrons and maids were at tea. The joyous ring of their voices went echoing among the rafters in the fine old Gothic roof. Lucille and Bruno and the Vicarage girls left the older party to the care of Mrs. Raymond and Elizabeth May, and went to have half an hour's romp with the little ones before the warning gong should sound at half-past seven and disperse the assembly. Lucille's face was lovely in the soft light of the tapers as she and Bruno drew near the Christmas-tree. There was no other light in the hall, except the glow of the wood fire, and an occasional sparkle of flame, as one log, slowly crumbling to ruin, reeled over and struck against the others, spluttering sparks as it fell.

'My love, how sweet you look!' said Bruno, touched by the tender light in Lucille's soft eyes. 'This is the kind of party which sets you off to the best advantage. I doubt if

you would look half so lovely if you were entertaining the county.'

'It is so nice to make these little things happy,' answered Lucille, quietly. 'They have so few pleasures! Why, do you know, they begin to look forward to their Christmas treat directly the summer school feast is over! But this year we are giving them a grander entertainment than usual. My dear father wished it to be so, in honour of—'

'Of our approaching marriage. How proud I ought to feel!' said Bruno. 'Next year I shall have a hand in the preparations. We will do something out of the common. What should you say to a mystery play—Saul and the Witch of Endor, or Daniel in the Den of Lions? I feel that it is in me to make a great effect as a witch or a lion.'

'I should not like to make light of sacred things,' remonstrated Lucille gently. She had been educated in a somewhat old-fashioned reverence for the Bible.

'O, but the grand old picturesque stories, we may make what use we please of those, I think,' said Bruno. 'The bishops treat them very lightly in the Speaker's Commentary. They manage to account for everything in a pleasant rational way. I daresay they explain the civility of Daniel's lions by supposing that they were the worn-out veterans of the Royal Zoo, toothless and overfed.'

Lucille looked quite unhappy at this horrible suggestion; and just then an avalanche of children, all rushing away from an ubiquitous blind-man, in the person of the youngest Vicarage girl, swept against the lovers, and entangled them in the game. The Vicarage girl, who seemed to be all eyes, pounced on Bruno; whereupon he had to be blindfolded, and went about catching children in armfuls of half a dozen at a time, after the manner of an ogre who wanted to spit them like larks, or bake them in a pie, with their toes sticking up out of the pastry.

The game proceeded with riotous mirth, till the sound of the great gong rose booming and buzzing through the hall, like some gigantic bumble-bee which had lost his way, and was knocking his head against the painted windows.

'Now then, all you little Cinderellas,' cried Bruno, throwing off his bandage, 'scurry home before your glass slippers fall off, for we have no princes for husbands in this country!'

The mothers and aunts came in from the tea-room, and swept up their belongings. Comforters and hats were put on, gratitude for the treat was expressed in hearty rustic accents

curtsies were made to the donors of the feast, and then away they all went, gentle and simple, tripping briskly over the frost-bound paths, while Lucille ran to her dressing-room to put on her dinner-gown.

There was to be no one but the family at dinner. Lord Ingleshaw had been dozing over his favourite Variorum Horace all the afternoon, hearing the clamour of childish voices and the prancing of little feet afar off, subdued by thick doors and tapestry curtains. When the children were gone he emerged from his retirement, and looked at the Christmas-tree, with its tapers waxing low, like so many lives fading out, and heard, with satisfaction, that his daughter's festival had been a great success. He found Elizabeth May in the hall, extinguishing the tapers and stripping the tree of its tinsel decorations.

'What an industrious young woman you are, Elizabeth!' he said kindly; 'I hear that the greater part of this tree was your work.'

'It was a great pleasure to work for it. I never saw a Christmas-tree before, my lord; I never went to church on a Christmas-day before; I never knew what Christmas meant till Lady Lucille taught me. O, how happy and good it all is, and how different from the life in the alley where I used to live! I wish some one would do something for those poor children at Christmas.'

'Surely some one does. There are good people all over London trying to help,' said Lord Ingleshaw.

'Yes, I know there is a great deal done; but there are so many who want help. There are so many dreadful holes and corners that ought to be done away with altogether; yet, if they were pulled down, where could the poor creatures go? There is a new city wanted in London—a city built for the poor, and owned by the rich. Poor landlords and poor tenants—that means misery.'

'And by a rich landlord I suppose you mean a man who doesn't expect to get any rent?' said his lordship.

'No, my lord; only a man who will give fair value for the money—a man who will see that his tenants drink pure water, and are not poisoned in their wretched houses. Let him be as exacting as he likes to get his due, but let him give us our due, and not take advantage of our helplessness. We must live near our work, whatever it is. The landlords know that, and they won't spend a shilling upon the fever-dens that are always crowded—yes, even when death is the tenant one hears of oftenest.'

'There are the Peabody houses.'

'Not half enough of them. We want more, and on a humbler scale. My heart aches when I think of what I have seen the little children and the old people suffer. Those who can go out and work are better off; but those that have to stay at home, and huddle together in those wretched rooms, and breathe that poisoned air—O, my lord, how hard it is for them! I was ill once, and lay in my attic for weeks, and I know what it was.'

'Poor creatures!' sighed his lordship. 'It is a hard nut for legislators and philanthropists to crack. We must get Mr. Challoner to take up the question next session. Well, Elizabeth, I am glad to see you happy and useful. Everybody speaks well of you. And that husband of yours—you have heard no more of him?'

'No, my lord, thank God!'

'So say I. We will do our best to protect you from him, come when he may.'

CHAPTER IX.

FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH.

'Some innocents 'scape not the thunderbolt.'

It was about ten minutes before nine, and the men and lads were coming lumbering into the great hall, looking just a little clumsier than usual in their Sunday raiment—a good deal of it new, in honour of Christmas; for it is well that such an important event as a new coat and waistcoat should be marked and, as it were, sanctified by some great day in the calendar, being so much easier for reference as an unmistakable date ever afterwards. Gaffer Goodlake would never forget that he wore his olive-green coat with brass buttons for the first time on Christmas-day. The sound of joy-bells would be associated with that garment for ever after; even when it came to be an every-day coat; going forth to its labour in the dewy mornings, and coming home dusty in the shadowy evenings; sitting under flowery hedges in the sunny noontide, and lying down for a brief snatch of slumber among the foxgloves and ragged-robins after the labourer's frugal meal.

Lord Ingleshaw and his family were dining in a pretty room on the upper floor, opening into the long corridor, a good way from the hall, but on a level with the musicians' gallery, where all those servants who were not actually employed had assembled to watch the village-feast. The housekeeper was there, in her purple brocade gown—a gown bought in a long-ago period, when every well-to-do matron had her brocade gown—and which Fashion's revolving wheel had made again the mode.

'I never thought I should live to see brocades come in again,' said Mrs. Prince, as she put on her purple garment, 'after the run there was upon morees; but so long as I've got a silk that can stand on end for richness, I don't care two straws for the fashion.'

'That's not *my* way,' said Tompion; 'I'd rather have a gingham made in the last fashion than silk-velvet if it was out of date. Give me style.'

Mrs. Prince, Tompion, Elizabeth, and all the housemaids

had assembled in the gallery. In a separate group were the old man-cook—whose *cuisine* dated from the time of the Reform Bill, and who had lived at the Castle so long, and had done so little work, that he had almost forgotten even that antique school of cookery—the clerk of the kitchen, and a butler or two. Dinner was finished in the Wouvermans room, and the family were dawdling over dessert, so the butlers were off duty. The village supper had been cooked by the kitchen-maid, and was being served by underlings. The upper servants looked on at the festivities of the lower classes as at a play.

'There's old father,' said one of the housemaids, pointing out her parent to her companion, as he shuffled into his place at the board. 'I hope he'll behave. He does put his knife into his mouth dreadful. I never care to sit down to a meal at home, though they're ever so pressing. When one is used to having everything set before one nicely it makes such a difference.'

The chief gardener sat at the head of the table, and carved. He was a Kentish man born and bred; and though he felt he had left these rustics far behind in the march of civilization, to say nothing of having saved a good bit of money, there was a bond between them. They had picked hops together on crisp October mornings years ago, when he was one of many cottage-children, poorly fed and clad, bringing his meagre little handful of grist to the family mill. He had worked hard and learned hard, and had made the very most of his intelligence in an intelligent form of industry; while these other poor fellows had laboured with their hands, and legs, and loins alone, digging and delving, and bush-harrowing, and ditching, and never rising above the rudest form of labour. He looked down upon them kindly from his lofty height, and smiled on them benignantly, as he sliced the savoury baron of beef, and filled plate after plate with that substantial fare.

Elizabeth May looked down at the cheerful scene—the long tables spread with that fine old pewter dinner-service which was one of the glories of Ingleshaw, the big brown beer-jugs, the bonny home-made loaves on broad wooden platters, the huge Cheshire cheese at one end of the table, a look of almost Gargantuan plenty on the board. Mrs. Prince had taken Elizabeth into particular favour, and, sheltered by that ponderous matron, she stood quite apart from Tompion and the rest of the maids, who were sniggering together, with their elbows resting on the gallery-rails,

at the uncouth ways of their kinsfolk below. Some of them had sweethearts in that rural assembly, and were interested in watching the vigorous manner in which those favoured ones despatched their beef and beer.

Elizabeth watched the scene with only a faint interest. She had been pleased and amused by the little children, with their fresh rosy cheeks and starry eyes; but these dull clodhoppers, with their gruff voices and loud laughter, their boorish movements and gigantic appetites, were hardly a pleasing sight. The old men, perhaps, were the most interesting; there was mute pathos in those bent shoulders, bowed with the labour of long years, that silvery hair worn of a patriarchal length. Were Abraham and Isaac and Jacob old men like that, Elizabeth wondered, bent and worn with field labour, fulfilling in the most literal manner God's curse upon man's disobedience? or were they grander figures, masters of many servants, owners of flocks and herds, lording it over their slaves, and eating the fat of the land? That story of Isaac's death-bed had always brought before her mind the picture of an old field-labourer, bent, and haggard, and worn with toil, eating his last meal with poverty's keen hunger, and leaving a heritage of homely labour to his sons.

Gradually as she looked down at the lighted hall, she grew to distinguish the various figures, to identify and individualise different faces in the four long rows of revellers. There was one man, near the upper end of the table, whose appearance puzzled her. He was so different in look and movements from the others. She was sure that he was a stranger, for she saw that no one spoke to him, and that, although he tried now and then to join in the conversation at his end of the table, the attempt always fell through, and he remained outside the circle, looking on with eager crafty eyes.

This man was a Londoner, Elizabeth felt assured. There was an indefinable something in his every movement which belonged to the costermonger class—the men born and bred in London alleys, steeped to the lips in a city life. That ferret-like eye, that peculiar cut of the jaw, so intensely expressive of cunning, were never seen in a field-labourer. Those sidelong glances and bird-like motions of the head—the movements of a creature that is always on the watch, the movements of a bird of prey—she had seen them all among her old acquaintance, and she had never seen the same type among the Kentish villagers.

There was no reason that a London labourer should not,

by some chance, find himself fairly entitled to a Christmas-supper at Lord Ingleshaw's expense. Yet the presence of this man disturbed Elizabeth, and she would have been very glad to discover how he came there.

'Do you know who that man is—the man with the long red hair, the fourth from the upper end of the table?' she asked Mrs. Prince.

'Lor', no, my dear,' answered the housekeeper; 'I don't know half of them at this distance, not even with my specs, and as to pointing out any one of 'em, I couldn't do it. But it's a very pretty sight, isn't it? And doesn't our fine old pewter service look lovely?'

Elizabeth could hardly take her eyes from the man with the long red hair—coarse rough hair, shaggy and long, altogether different from the close horsey cut usually affected by the London coster; and yet she was not the less certain, despite a very elaborate smock-frock, that this man was a Londoner, so vividly did his appearance recall the associates of her early days.

Supper was finished in about three-quarters of an hour, and then came a good half-hour for speeches and songs. The speeches were short, but the songs were long and of a narrative kind, with choruses which, in some cases, seemed slightly irrelevant, not to say unintelligible, but which were executed with much spirit, and gave general satisfaction. As the joviality of the company increased, under the inspiring influence of music, Elizabeth saw that the red-haired man had made for himself a friend in the person of an under-gardener who sat next him, and with whom he was now in close conversation—so close that neither of the two joined in the chorus of the song now going forward.

Elizabeth knew this under-gardener for an honest, simple-minded youth, a picture of grinning good nature, a lad who would be ready to make friends with anybody.

At half-past ten the entertainment was all over, and the men were dispersing. Just as they were clearing out of the hall—the red-haired man and James Morley, the gardener, still hanging together—Elizabeth's attention was distracted by Mrs. Prince.

'We're going to have a bit of hot supper in my room,' she said—'Mr. Scrimger, Jones, and Mason, and Tompion, and Mary Milford. You might as well join us, Miss May, if you're not above sitting down with servants now that you're going to be a governess. It'll be your first and last Christmas at Ingleshaw Castle, I suppose.'

'Indeed, I don't hold myself above anybody in this house,' said Elizabeth eagerly; 'I hope no one will ever think that. I know how low I am, and that I was brought here out of charity. I shall never forget that. But you must excuse me to-night, dear Mrs. Prince; I have a bad headache, and I couldn't eat any supper.'

'Poor thing! You worked too hard at that Christmas-tree all the afternoon,' said the housekeeper, compassionately. 'I never knew such a girl to work; I only wish the others were like you. Well, you shall go to your room, and I'll bring you a glass of hot negus the last thing, or a little egg-flip, and a piece of pound-cake.'

'No, indeed, I couldn't take any.'

'O, but you must; I'll bring it as I go up to bed. Come, Tompion.'

They all trooped downstairs, leaving Elizabeth alone in the gallery. She sank down into a chair in a corner, very glad to be alone. Her side was aching, and her heart ached too, though she hardly knew why. God had been very good to her. She had come to Ingleshaw Castle a beggar in rags, newly released from the sick-ward of one workhouse, and with no better prospect than the casual-ward of another workhouse. She had been brought to this beautiful home, and had been purified from the taint of her old life, and fed, and clothed, and taught, and transformed into a new creature. And now she stood on the threshold of a new life, a useful life, in which her own labour should pay the cost of her maintenance. No one could reproach her as a beggar, or a hanger-on upon the skirts of charity, when she was Mrs. Raymond's governess. And yet the thought of that new life brought her no ray of hope. It seemed to her that she was going to be parted for ever from all that made life worth having, when she had seen the last of Bruno Challoner. To be near him, to be a servant—yes, even the lowest scullion—in the house to which he came, or in which he lived, would be a life not altogether unblessed; but to exist in the outer darkness of a world upon which he never entered—O, how blank and dreary the prospect of such an existence seemed to her!

She looked back, as she sat listless in her corner, leaning against the massive oaken balustrade, the great empty hall, lit only by the low glimmer of dying logs, lying below her like a dark gulf. She looked back, and remembered those summer days in which she had been the messenger between lady Lucille and her lover; when she had seen and talked with

Bruno Challoner ever so many times in the day, comforting him when he was downcast, bringing him tender messages from his betrothed, answering the same anxious questions again and again as they two strolled up and down the grassy space below Lady Lucille's windows.

She remembered how gracious he had been to her; how grateful for the comfort she had carried to him; how he had seemed to give her the credit of every cheering report; with what exquisite tenderness he had spoken of the sick girl lying in her darkened room up yonder, behind the silken curtains. And then she remembered how as the slow summer days went by she began to look forward to those meetings in the rose-garden with a strange delight, longing for the hour that brought Bruno Challoner to her side, dwelling upon his words, keeping his looks and tones locked in her heart; haunted by his face all the time they were parted, thrilled by the sight of him when they met, as if that face were something new and strange. He was so different from—so far above—all the men she had known in her past life. The refinement of his manner, his graciousness, the music of his voice, his lofty bearing, made him seem a god-like creature in the sight of her who had been familiar only with the outcasts of this earth, the refuse of humanity. This was her sole excuse for loving him. But she did not sin deliberately. The fatal passion crept into her heart unawares.

Then came the long days of Lady Lucille's convalescence, during which Mr. Challoner was altogether absent; and then that August morning on the sands at Weymouth, when the lovers met after their enforced separation, and Elizabeth, not yet schooled in self-governance, rebelled against Fate as she paced the bay, alone and forgotten, while those two sat side by side, a little way off, all the world to each other. And then followed days of delight on board the yacht—days when she made a third in all their talk, lived with them and belonged to them—days in which Bruno seemed almost as much to her as he was to his plighted wife. A time of false unholy happiness—delusive, ensnaring—which ended that September night, when, in a moment of reckless, headlong, half-despairing passion, she betrayed herself, and let Bruno Challoner into the secret of his own weakness, which had made this nameless waif dearer to him than his betrothed. He had fought, and fought manfully, against his folly, and from that hour all familiar every-day association between him and Elizabeth, as between friends and equals, ceased for

ever. She hated herself for the madness of that moment, the uncontrollable impulse which had wrung the truth from her despairing soul; and the thought that he scorned her for that folly galled her proud spirit, and made the burden of life almost unbearable. Then it was that the sword began to prey too fiercely on the scabbard, and that the very foundations of life were sapped. She, who had outlived hunger, cold, fever and squalor, privations and hardships unspeakable, succumbed to the keener agony of a bruised and broken spirit.

There was comfort for the wounded soul in that brief interview in the wood, when Bruno told her to be brave, and revealed his own weakness; there was comfort in the knowledge that he had never scorned her. He, whose voice trembled as he spoke to her, whose hand clasped hers in such intensity of hopeless passion, could never have despised her.

She would be brave for his sake, true for his sake; she would die sooner than that Lady Lucille should ever know that either of them had been false. Her thoughts went slowly back over that passionate, sorrowful past, as she sat in the dark gallery, lighted only by the lamp in the corridor—light that came faintly through a half-open door. Looking back to-night, life seemed strange and dreamlike: it was as if she were recalling somebody else's story rather than her own. She seemed to have passed beyond caring very much about anything. Grief had lost the sharpness of its sting. The pain was dull and deadened; but the future was quite hopeless. It was as if she stood on some little island—a mere rock—in the midst of the wide desolate sea, not caring to look to one side or the other, where all the prospect was blank and joyless.

She was glad to think she would be far away, at some unknown place by the sea, when Mr. Challoner and Lady Lucille were married. She could have schooled herself to look on at the wedding calmly enough, having acquired a wonderful power of self-command during the last three months; but still she would have felt somehow like a skeleton at the feast. She could not have rejoiced as others rejoiced, with honest unfaltering heart. Only yesterday, when Lady Lucille called her into her dressing-room to see the white satin wedding-gown, outspread upon a sofa in all its glistening loveliness, half-veiled in softest lace, and garlanded with orange-blossoms, she had shrunk shudderingly away, fancying that she saw a shroud lying there.

'It will be your turn to be married soon, I daresay,' said

Lucille, knowing nothing about Tom Brook, 'and then I shall give you your wedding gown.'

The clock struck eleven. Sounds of music, or of laughter, came now and then from the corridor. The little Christmas party were sitting in Lucille's morning-room, just as they had sat last night. It was one of the prettiest rooms in the Castle, and the Earl preferred it to any, except his library. Once the door remained open all through 'Batti, batti,' which Lucille sang exquisitely. O, what deep love the melody breathed from those young lips! Elizabeth could guess how Bruno stood by the piano, looking down at his betrothed as she sang; or sat close by the angle of the instrument, with his face on a level with the singer's. So she would sing to him for many and many a year to come, till Time dulled the freshness of the voice; but it would be sweet in his ears to the end, sweetest when he heard her singing to her children. No one could doubt that those two would be happy together, for they loved each other with a deep-rooted affection, a love of old days and early years, which no fleeting passion, born of a truant fancy, could undermine.

While Elizabeth sat in her corner of the shadowy gallery there were warmth and life and brightness in Lady Lucille's morning-room, from which the sound of music and voice came with such pathetic meaning to the ear of that lonely listener. Never had Lucille felt happier than she felt to-night, never more secure of her lover's affection. The cloud that had been between them for a little while had passed away altogether, and perfect confidence was restored. Lord Ingleshaw looked on from his easy chair by the hearth, as those two sat by the piano—looked on with silent rejoicing, grateful to Providence, which, in this union, had fulfilled his long-cherished desire. He had never told Lucille how fondly he hoped for her marriage with his heir; how dear a dream it had ever been with him to picture his daughter in the old home, her husband occupying that place which his son would have held had his wife lived to give him a son. Not for worlds would he have influenced her choice, in order to gratify any desire of his. He loved her too well for that. But this thing had come about naturally, without his interference, and he was deeply thankful. God had been very good to him.

'My little Lucille,' he said presently, when his daughter crept to his side, and knelt down by the arm of his chair, and

nestled her fair head against his shoulder, 'my dear one, it seems only yesterday that you were a child upon my knees. And now so soon to be a wife! I used to think the years were long and slow; but now I know how swift my darling has made them for me. I can measure the tranquillity of my days by your growth, Lucille. You have grown from a baby to a woman almost unawares.'

'It has seemed a long, long life to me, dear father,' said Lucille, 'but not an hour too long. You dream away so many hours over Horace and Virgil, and all your favourite books, that I daresay the days do slip by unawares.'

'True,' said the Earl, 'I waste a good deal of time among my books: but it is pleasant dreaming. And I mean to be more active in future. I shall help Bruno in all his humanitarian schemes. Elizabeth May has been talking to me about the dwellings of the London poor—that is a subject I should like to go into thoroughly. But it is too late to talk about it to-night. There goes half-past eleven, a most unholy hour for Ingleshaw Castle. Suppose you read us Milton's hymn, Lucille, to give us a comfortable Christmas-tide feeling before we go to bed. You used to read those noble verses very prettily.'

'I taught her,' said Miss Marjorum, folding her mittened hands, and smiling the smile of self-satisfaction. 'Before she was twelve years old I had made her familiar with some of the masterpieces of our language. She knows the "Hymn to the Nativity" by heart.'

Lucille, sitting on a stool by her father's chair, sheltered from observation, began, in her calm, well-modulated voice, the grand Miltonic hymn,

> 'It was the winter wild
> While the heaven-born Child
> All meanly wrapt in the rude manger.'

Miss Marjorum was not a genius, but she was a most capable teacher, and she had taught her pupil to pronounce her own language, a gift which very few young ladies of the present day possess, or perhaps would care to possess; for there is a savour of the archaic in the English tongue so spoken, as old-fashioned as the prose of Addison. Young ladies prefer, for the most part, to talk society language, which is almost as unlike English as if it were Ojibbeway, and which tortures and mystifies the intelligent foreigner who has learnt our language out of books.

Lucille recited without bombast or rant of any kind—

calmly, quietly, but with a clear and finished utterance, and with the expression which results naturally from perfect intelligence.

Bruno listened with delight. It was a new gift revealed to him in his future wife.

'It is better than music. You shall recite for me every evening when we are alone, Lucille,' he said, with serio-comic authority. 'You can get up your Milton and your Keats, your Wordsworth and your Shelley, in the odd half-hours of your day; and after dinner, when I am worn-out with public work, you can recite to me, as I lie on the sofa and smoke. It will soothe my harassed nerves.'

And now, on the stroke of twelve, they bade each other good-night, after a Christmas-day without a cloud. Few such happy days come into any lifetime; days at once good and happy, since they have ministered to the happiness of the many.

Midnight sounded from the clock in the Gothic gateway, from the clock in the stables, from the old eight-day clock on the staircase, and the Louis Quatorze bracket-clock in the corridor. All was hushed and dark in the Castle; but still Elizabeth sat in her corner of the gallery, with no more inclination for sleep than if it had been midday instead of midnight. She had watched the servants in the hall below—two of them going their rounds with a lantern, locking and bolting doors, and making sure that all was secure for the night. They performed their work in a somewhat perfunctory manner on this occasion, as men who had supped heavily off the lukewarm remains of the 'baron,' and who had not been limited in the item of beer. A dozen burglars might have hidden in the Gothic hall while the two men went round with their lantern, peering into the corner to which its rays were directed, and ignoring all the rest of the hall. The figures in armour, behind which it would be so easy for a living man to conceal himself; the big oaken settles; the tall Japanese screen, which fenced off the draught from one door; the heavy tapestry curtain hanging before another—all these remained unexplored by men or by lantern. There was infinite security to the minds of the two custodians in the very sound of the ponderous bolts, in the very scroop of the mighty keys in the ancient locks.

When they were gone, Elizabeth looked over into the hall from her corner, which was in deepest shadow. The moon had risen, and her cold clear light streamed through the high

painted window in the wall behind Elizabeth, and flooded that side of the hall opposite to her hiding-place. The plated armour sent forth silvery gleams in that romantic light. A little while ago, before the men came to lock the doors, Elizabeth had fancied she saw one of those effigies of dead and gone warriors faintly stirred, as if some one had moved in the background. This was nearly an hour ago, by the red light of the expiring fire. Now, by the more vivid light of the moon, she distinctly saw one of those armour-men shiver upon his base, and a dark figure stirring behind it. Then the living figure crept out from behind the armed image, and moved stealthily towards the curtained doorway which opened into an anteroom communicating with the Earl's library. She saw him lift the curtain, and go into the anteroom, and then, in the absolute stillness of the house, she heard the opening of a window, and the gruff murmur of men's voices. There were midnight intruders in the Castle—secret intruders, who must needs mean evil.

What should she do—alarm the house, and get those men taken into custody? They had not seen her. She could easily slip away by the corridor to the back staircase and the tower in which the men-servants slept, and the household would rise, strong in numbers, capable of defying a band of burglars, be they never so desperate. One consideration only restrained Elizabeth from hastening, as fast as her feet would carry her, to the house-steward's door. She had the face of that red-haired man still in her mind. She had been recalling it, puzzling herself about it, trying desperately to make it out, since the revellers dispersed; and she knew now that the savage projecting jaw, the thin lips, the crafty look, belonged to her husband, Tom Brook, and no other. She remembered her fears after that meeting in October, how closely Tom Brook had questioned her about the interior of the Castle—questions from which she had withheld all satisfactory replies. And now she felt very sure that Brook had entered the Castle, disguised and unsuspected, among the crowd of villagers. To give the alarm would be to destroy the man who had once cared for her and cherished her, after his brutal fashion. Yet she was resolutely bent upon hindering Tom Brook and his accomplices from doing any wrong to life or property in that house.

She knew that the plate-room was on the same level as the library, at the end of a narrow passage behind that apartment. She knew that it was protected by an iron door, which would not be easily violated. She had heard of the perfection

to which the art of burglary had been brought of late years, and she knew that it was possible for the skill of an highly-trained thief to set locks and iron doors at defiance; but she knew that this could not be done quickly. There was time for deliberation on her part before she interfered to protect her benefactor's property.

She slipped off her shoes, and crept softly down the broad oak staircase, and across the wide moonlit hall, to that curtained doorway, dreading lest she should be seen by some one watching on the threshold of the anteroom. But there was no such watcher. She lifted the tapestry, and crept into the anteroom. There was no light except the light of the winter sky reflected upon the snowy whiteness below—a cold ghastly glare, which gave all things an unearthly look. The shutters were unfastened, and one lattice of the mullioned window stood wide open. The wintry air blew in upon her, chilling her to the heart. She had no doubt that this window had been opened by Tom Brook a few minutes ago, and that his accomplices had crept in through the opening. She went through the anteroom to the library. Here all was darkness and emptiness; but the narrow little door leading into the passage was ajar. She could hear the cautious whispers of the men in the passage, and she had very little doubt they were already at work upon the iron door. She pushed the library door a little further open, and looked into the passage. There was a man on his knees before the iron door, working assiduously at the hinges, upon that system of the progressive wedge, which is supposed to be infallible in such cases; another man was holding a pocket-lamp, which gave a vivid concentrated light just where it was wanted; and the third man, Tom Brook, was looking on, upon the watch, with eye and ear, for any interruption. A small black hand-bag on the ground held the instruments necessary for an artistic burglary; a couple of empty carpet-bags were ready to contain the spoil. Tom Brook stood two or three paces behind the two professional burglars. Elizabeth stole close up to him, and laid her hand lightly on his arm.

'Tom, I want to speak to you,' she said, in a low voice.

He turned sharply round, clutched her wrist in his fierce grip, and held her as in a vice.

'What are you doing here?' he muttered savagely.

'Watching you. I have been watching you from the music-gallery for the last hour. I saw you at the supper, and knew you in spite of your red wig. If you will get away quietly with those men, without taking anything out

of this house, I will not give the alarm; I will tell no one about you.'

'You give the alarm!' said Mr. Brook. 'I should like to see you do it! You, indeed! I'd soon stop your little pipe.'

'I will do it, unless you take those men away this instant. This house shall not be robbed—this house, which has sheltered me—if I can prevent it!'

'You're a nice young woman to cheek your lawful husband like that,' said Tom Brook, with his eye always looking beyond her towards the end of the dark passage, his keen ear always on the alert for any sound of approaching footsteps. 'Come, Bess, don't be a fool. I didn't spoil your game; don't you spoil mine. You go to bed, and let us do our work quietly, without hurting anybody. If you try to make a row there'll be murder.'

'You had better go before any one stirs,' she said resolutely, fearless, although he had her in his grip. 'There are plenty of men in the Castle. If the alarm is once given, you won't get off, you or your accomplices. I might have rung the alarm-bell, and had the whole house up five minutes ago; but I didn't want you to be caught. You had better get off quietly, now, while there's a chance.'

'You had better hold your noise,' said Tom Brook, taking a knife out of his pocket, and unclasping it with his teeth, his right hand still grasping Elizabeth's wrist.

In a moment he had swung her down on her knee, he had the blade at her throat, with intent to frighten and to silence her, perhaps, rather than to slay, although his looks were deadly enough as he scowled down at her.

She defied him even then, and, lifting up her voice, shrieked loud and shrill—a shriek that thrilled through the silent vaulted hall, and rang up to the roof, like the sound of a clarion.

Before that wild cry died into silence, the alarm-bell rang clamorously above the roof, calling help from far and wide, as it had rung two hundred and thirty years ago in the Civil Wars, and only once since then, on a summer night, in the reign of George III., when there had been an alarm of fire, beginning and ending in smoke. Tom Brook, not so hardened as the professional brotherhood, hesitated. He did not want to murder this creature, who had done all the harm it was in her power to do him, and who now crouched at his feet breathless, exhausted, looking up at him defyingly even in her helplessness. What could he gain by killing

her? All chance of getting into the plate-room was over now; the men had only to make their escape. They huddled their tools together into the black bag, made for the open window of the anteroom, just as a figure carrying a candle in one hand and a pistol in the other appeared at the end of the passage. The men dashed into the library, the shortest cut to the exit they wanted. But the man who went through the library door last had caught sight of that approaching figure. He clapped to the door, and locked it, thus securing a safe retreat for himself and his friend. Tom Brook, who was an outsider, but who had put up the robbery, was thus caught in a trap. He could not follow his friends, but had to make good his own escape in the teeth of the enemy.

He had that knife in his hand, that stout Sheffield blade, which seemed made for murder. His quick eye told him that the bell had as yet brought only that one assailant. It was a question of moments. Half a minute more, and the scared half-awakened household might be upon him. This man must have been awake and dressed, for he had come at the first sound of the bell.

Tom Brook flung off his wife, and made a rush for the only outlet, the end of the passage which led into the hall, through which he could double back to the open window in the anteroom, and then off across the snow as swift as a stag, to the cold covert of leafless woods.

But as he sprang forward the other man rushed upon him. It was Bruno Challoner.

Before Bruno could do anything—he had no intention of using the pistol, except in self-defence—Tom Brook lifted his knife and grappled with him. Elizabeth saw them close with each other in what seemed a death-struggle: she sprang to her feet, and, as Bruno threw off his antagonist, who fell back a pace or two for a second spring, the girl flung herself between the two men, and the blow, intended for Bruno, fell, with all Tom Brook's savage strength, upon the breast of his wife.

She gave one low shuddering cry, and sank upon Bruno's arm. He clasped her to his breast, bathed in her life-blood, with his left arm, while with the right he took a steady aim at her murderer, and would have shot him dead, if his hand had not been arrested by Lord Ingleshaw, who came upon the group just in time to prevent this wild justice. The house-steward was with his master. Both had huddled on their clothes and rushed down to the hall at the sound of

the alarm-bell, which had been rung by Mrs. Prince, who had been overtaken by sleep before the fire in her own cosy parlour, after the comfortable Christmas supper, while watching the little silver saucepan of mulled wine which she was preparing as a restorative for Elizabeth May. The wine had all boiled away when Mrs. Prince was awakened from that slumber by the awful sound of Elizabeth's shriek. She had rushed at once to the little stone vestibule, where the rope of the alarm-bell hung, fully possessed by the idea that the Castle was in flames. When she looked round her, and saw only moonlight and shadow, she began to think that wild long shriek must have been an incident in a dream.

Lord Ingleshaw and his steward secured Tom Brook, and wrenched the knife out of his hand before he could do any more mischief. He did not look as if he meant to renew the attack. Ghastly white, and with unspeakable horror in his countenance, he stared at his murdered wife, as her pallid face, with death dreadfully visible in every feature, lay on Bruno Challoner's breast, the glazing eyes looking up at him with infinite unconquerable love—love now made divine by the glory of a soul passing to the spirit-land.

'I saved you!' she murmured with her last breath, happier in that one moment of sublimated bliss than some women have been in the lukewarm joys of a long lifetime.

Lucille's wedding was deferred from January to April—the season of tender promise, of primroses and violets, budding hedgerows, burgeoning trees, the life and light that herald the coming of summer. She and Bruno had both willed it so. They would not be married while the odour of death was in the house—while the earth that covered Elizabeth's coffin in Ingleshaw churchyard had still the freshness of newly-dug mould—before even the flowers could take root above that humble village grave, a grave whose headstone bore only the name 'Elizabeth,' with the date of her death, and the words—'Valued much and lamented much,' below it.

She who was nothing to them, neither by kindred nor by equality of rank or fortune—who had come and gone out of their lives like a dream, had vanished like a tale that is told, leaving no token behind her—had yet influenced the lives of both too deeply to be easily forgotten, or to be thought of lightly now she was gone.

In the chill winter gloaming, while the dead girl was

lying in the little room at the end of the corridor, her narrow white bed strewn with Christmas roses, snowdrops, and white hyacinths, Bruno Challoner made a full confession to his betrothed, they two sitting alone by the fireside, in Lucille's morning-room. He told her how weak he had been, how strongly tempted, and how near he had been to falling. He testified to the loyalty of her who was gone. He bared his heart in all its strength, in all its weakness, to the woman who was to be his wife, and, by that perfect confidence, strengthened the bond between them as only truth can strengthen and sanctify such ties.

'O Bruno, I am so thankful to you for telling me this!' faltered Lucille, when he had said his last word. 'Nothing less than this could have given me perfect peace—perfect confidence in you and your love. I knew that there was a time when you cared for her—yes, when your heart had been lured away from me by her strange beauty, by all her wayward unconscious graces and charms. And I knew that she loved you. I guessed her secret that night on board the yacht, and there was a time when I almost hated her. But God helped me somehow to bear that agony; and I prayed for patience; for I thought if I were patient your love would come back to me—you had loved me too long to forget me easily. It was a habit of your life to love me; and the old, old love, the love of all our happy years, could not so easily be trampled out of life. I thought of that big bay-tree in the garden, and how, after it had been cut down to the roots one bitter winter, a new tree sprang up in its place, and grew and flourished with a wonderful growth, because the old roots were so strong and deep, the gardener said. And I thought that your love was too deeply rooted to be killed by one frost; and I waited and hoped; but I never felt sure I had not lost you till Christmas-eve, when you came back to me after our parting; and then I saw in your eyes, in your dear smile, that you were all my own again, my true and loyal lover, my true knight, without fear or blame. We will always think tenderly of her who is gone, dear, for she loved us both, and was true to us both. We will remember her, and be sorry for her sad fate all the days of our lives.'

Bruno had told Lucille about the tie between Tom Brook and the dead girl. Mr. Brook was now awaiting the result of the adjourned inquest, in the lock-up at the market-town. His two accomplices had been caught in the park by the Ingleshaw gamekeepers, roused from their beds by the Castle

bell, and ready to capture the first stranger they encountered. The men had been caught red-handed, as it were—with the implements of their felonious trade about them—and they too were in the lock-up at the market-town, waiting the issue of an inquiry before the magistrates.

That inquiry resulted in the committal of the two men for an attempted burglary, while Tom Brook was committed for manslaughter, of which crime he was duly convicted at the spring assizes, when his accomplices were sentenced to seven years' penal servitude, he, Tom, having turned Queen's evidence, and revealed the whole plan of the robbery. Tom, having thus made himself a useful instrument in furthering the ends of justice, got off lightly for so small a thing as a wife's life, and was allotted only a three years' seclusion from society and active usefulness.

The violets were in bloom on Elizabeth's grave when Lucille and Bruno were married one fair morning in late April. They left the churchyard gate in the carriage which was to take them to the station, from which they were to begin their honeymoon travels; and scarcely was the carriage out of sight when the inhabitants of Ingleshaw, rich and poor, laid their heads together to counterbalance this quiet wedding by a grand display of triumphal arches, flowers, flags, fireworks, and school-children, in honour of the young couple's home-coming.

GEORGE CAULFIELD'S JOURNEY.

CHAPTER I.

BY THE NIGHT MAIL.

The night-mail was to start in five minutes from the great central terminus in the busy commercial city of Grandchester, and the Rev. George Caulfield, with a travelling bag in his hand and a comfortable railway rug over his arm, was walking slowly along the platform, peering into the first-class carriages as he went by, in quest of ease and solitude. He was a man of reserved temper, bookish beyond his years, and he had a horror of finding himself imprisoned among five noisy spirits, cottony, horsey, and of that boisterous and coarsely spoken temperament which the refined and gentle parson would have characterised as rowdy. The Reverend George was a Christian gentleman, but so far as it was possible for his mild nature to hate any one, he hated fast young men. He was not fond of strangers in a general way. He endured them, but he did not love them. He had lingered on the platform till the train was within three minutes of starting, in the hope of securing for himself the luxury of privacy. As the long hand of the station clock marked the third minute before eleven, he espied an empty carriage, and was in the act of entering it, when a hand was laid very gently on his sleeve.

'Pardon me, sir,' said a somewhat agitated voice, 'are you a medical man?'

Mr. Caulfield turned, and confronted a man of slight figure and middle height, some years younger than himself, a man with a pale face, delicate features, and soft black eyes—a very interesting countenance, thought the curate. The stranger looked anxious and hurried.

'No,' answered Mr. Caulfield, 'I am a clergyman.'

'That is almost as good. My dear sir, will you do me a great favour? My sister, an invalid, is travelling by this train, alone; but she will be met by friends at Milldale Junction. She is very ill—nothing infectious, chest complaint, poor girl. If you will afford her the privilege of your protection, only as far as Milldale, you will oblige me immensely.'

There was no time for hesitation, the bell was ringing clamorously, people were hurrying to their seats.

'With pleasure,' said the good-natured curate, sorry to lose the delight of loneliness; embarrassed at the idea of an unknown invalid, but far too kind to shrink from doing an act of mercy.

The young man ran to the second-class waiting-room, the door of which was just opposite, and returned almost immediately, carrying a muffled figure in his arms, a small, fragile form, which he carried as easily as if it had been that of a child. This slender figure, half buried in a large Rob Roy shawl, he placed with infinite care in one of the seats furthest from the door, then he ran back to the waiting-room for more wraps, a pillow, and a foot-warmer. He administered with womanly tenderness to the comfort of the invalid, who reclined motionless and silent in her corner, and then, hurried and agitated by the imminent departure of the mail, he stood at the door of the carriage talking to Mr. Caulfield, who had taken his seat in the opposite corner to that occupied by the invalid.

'You are more than good,' said the stranger. 'Don't talk to her, she is low and nervous, and you will agitate her painfully if you force her to talk. I daresay she will doze all the way. It is only an hour from here to Milldale, and no stoppage till you get there. Oh, by the way, kindly take this bottle, and if she should turn faint or giddy on the way, give her a few drops of the contents. There goes the flag. Will you allow me to offer you my card? I am deeply indebted. Good night.'

All this had been said hurriedly. George Caulfield had hardly time to take the proffered card when the engine puffed itself laboriously out of the great, ghastly terminus, a wilderness of iron-work, a labyrinth of tunnels and sidings and incomprehensible platforms, very gloomy on this cold winter night.

For the first few minutes Mr. Caulfield felt so confused and disturbed by the suddenness of the charge that had been forced upon him that he hardly knew what he was doing.

Then he glanced at the lady, and saw with a feeling of relief that her head was reposing comfortably against the padded division of the carriage, and that her face was hidden by a blue gauze veil, which she wore over a small brown straw hat. She was breathing somewhat heavily, he thought, but that was to be expected in a sufferer from chest complaint.

'I hope her heart is all right,' thought George, with a sudden sense of the awfulness of his position were his invalid charge to expire while in his care.

He looked at the stranger's card:—

Mr. Elsden,
Briargate.

The address looked well. Briargate was one of the most respectable business streets in Grandchester. Doubtless it had once been a rustic lane, where briars and roses grew abundantly, and the bees and butterflies, and village lads and lasses, made merry amidst odours of new-mown hay. Nowadays Briargate was a narrow street of lofty warehouses, tall enough to shut out the sun, a street that reeked with odours of machine oil.

The express had cleared Grandchester by this time, tearing along a viaduct above a forest of tall chimneys, and then, with a sweeping curve, away to the windy open country, a land as wild and fresh and free as if there were no such things as factories and smoky chimneys in the world. Mr. Caulfield had for the first ten minutes or so felt relieved by his inability to see his companion's face. It had been a comfort to him to behold her placidly asleep yonder, requiring no attention, leaving him free to dip into Tennyson's last idyll, which he carried uncut in his travelling bag. But so variable is the human mind, so fanciful and altogether irrational at times, that now Mr. Caulfield began to feel vaguely curious about the face hidden under the blue gauze veil. He began to wonder about it. Was it so very pale, so deadly white, as it seemed to him under that gauze veil, in the dim light of the oil-lamp? No, it was the blue gauze, no doubt, which gave that ghastly pallor to the sharply cut features, the sunken cheeks.

The young lady's eyes were altogether hidden by the shadow of her hat, but Mr. Caulfield felt sure that she was asleep. She was breathing so quietly that he could scarcely see any indication of the faint breath that must be stirring her breast in gentle undulations. Sometimes he fancied he saw the folds of the Rob Roy shawl rise and fall in regular pulsations. Sometimes it seemed to him that nothing

stirred save the shadows moved by the flickering of the wind-blown flame.

He sat and watched that quiet figure in the corner, only taking his eyes away now and then to look out at the dark land through which they were speeding, to see a cosy village, lit by half-a-dozen farthing rushlights, flit by like a phantom, or a town that made a patch of angry glare on the edge of the horizon. Useless to think of enjoying Tennyson by the sickly gleam of that wretched lamp! He curled himself up in his warm rug, he closed his eyes, and tried to sleep. In vain. He was thinking of the face under the blue veil. He was broad awake—hopelessly awake. He could do nothing but sit and contemplate the figure reposing so quietly in the opposite corner. How he longed for Milldale junction! He looked at his watch. The inexorable dial told him that it was only half-an-hour since he left Grandchester. His own sensations told him that it was a long night of agony.

Naturally a nervous man, to-night his nerves were getting the mastery over him.

'I never took such a miserable journey,' he said to himself. 'If she would only throw back that veil—if she would only speak to me—if she would only stir, or make some little sign of life! It is like travelling with Death personified. Were she to lift that veil this instant I should expect to see a grinning skull underneath.'

He had been told not to speak to her, but the inclination to disobey that injunction was every instant intensifying. Yet, if she were sleeping as placidly as she seemed to sleep, it would be cruel to disturb her; and he was a man overflowing with the milk of human kindness.

He took out his Tennyson, and cut the leaves, puzzling out a few lines here and there by the uncertain lamplight. This helped him to while away a quarter of an hour. He looked at his watch. God be praised! fifteen minutes more and the train would be at Milldale. What bliss to deliver that poor creature into the keeping of her friends—to have done with that muffled figure and that unseen face for ever!

The train was fast approaching the junction; seven minutes more alone remained of the hour, and this night mail was famed for its punctuality.

Just at the last that feeling of morbid curiosity which had been tormenting the curate for the greater part of the journey became an irresistible impulse. He changed his seat to that directly opposite his silent companion. Here he could see the form of the delicate features under the blue

veil. How cruelly illness had sharpened that outline? The girl's ungloved hand hung listlessly over the morocco-covered arm which divided her seat from the next. Such a pallid hand, so nerveless in its attitude. Something, he knew not what, prompted Mr. Caulfield to touch those pale fingers. He bent over and laid his hand lightly upon them.

Great God, what an icy hand! He had felt the touch of death on many a sad occasion in the path of duty, but this was colder than death itself. A cry of horror burst from his lips. He snatched aside the gauze veil, and saw a face purpled by the awful shadow of death.

'Milldale Junction! Change here for Broughborough, Mudford, Middlebridge, Sloughcombe——' Here followed a string of names that dwindled into silence far away along the platform.

George Caulfield sprang out of the railway carriage like a man distraught. He seized upon the nearest guard.

'For God's sake tell me what to do!' he cried. 'There is a lady in that carriage dead, or dying. Indeed, I fear she is actually dead. She was placed in my charge by a stranger at Grandchester. She is to be met by friends here. It will be an awful shock for them—near relatives, perhaps. How am I to find them? How am I to break the sad news to them?'

He was pale to the lips, cold drops of sweat were on his brow. All the pent-up excitement of the last hour burst from him now with uncontrollable force. The guard was as calm as a man of iron.

'Fetch the stationmaster here, will you?' he said to a passing porter. 'Sad thing, sir,' he said to the agitated curate; 'but you'd better keep yourself quiet. Such misfortunes will happen. We'll get a medical man here presently. I dare say there's one in the train. Perhaps the lady has only fainted. Hadn't you better step inside and sit with her?'

They were standing at the door of the carriage. George Caulfield glanced with a shudder at that muffled figure in the furthest corner.

'No,' he answered, profoundly agitated, 'I could do no good. I fear there is no hope. I fear she is dead.'

'No relation of yours, sir, the lady?' asked the guard, scrutinising the curate rather curiously.

'I never saw her till to-night;' and then, in flurried accents, Mr. Caulfield related the circumstances of his departure from Grandchester.

'Here comes the station-master,' said the guard, without vouchsafing any comment on the curate's story.

The station-master was a business-like man, of commanding presence, and Mr. Caulfield turned to him as for protection.

'What am I to do?' he asked, when the guard had briefly stated the case.

'Nothing, I should think,' answered the station-master, shortly; 'but you'd better stay to see the upshot of the business. Where are the lady's friends, I wonder? They ought to have turned up by this time. Johnson, just you go along the platform and look out for anybody waiting to meet a lady from Grandchester, and send some one else along the line to inquire for a doctor.'

The guard departed on his errand; the station-master stayed. In three minutes a porter came, followed by an elderly man, bearded and spectacled.

'Medical gentleman, sir,' said the porter.

The doctor got into the carriage and looked at the lady.

'Bring me a better light,' he asked, and a lamp was brought.

A crowd was collecting by this time, travellers who scented some excitement, and thought they could not make a better use of their remaining five minutes than in finding out all about it.

'You had better send for the police,' exclaimed the doctor, reappearing at the door of the carriage. 'This is a bad case.'

'How do you mean?' inquired the station-master.

'I mean that this poor creature has died from the effects of a narcotic poison.'

'Great heaven!' cried the curate; 'I had a presentiment there was something wrong.'

The doctor and a porter lifted the muffled figure out of the carriage, and conveyed it to the nearest waiting-room. Three minutes more and the train would be moving.

A police-constable appeared as if by magic, and planted himself at the curate's side.

The guard came back.

'Nobody here to meet the lady,' he said. 'There must be a mistake somewhere.'

'What am I to do?' demanded George Caulfield, looking helplessly from the station-master to the doctor.

'Keep yourself as quiet as you can, I should say,' answered the station-master.

'But, good heavens! I may be suspected of being concerned in this poor creature's death unless her friends appear

to verify my statement. Ah, by-the-bye, her brother gave me his card. I can tell you her name, at any rate.'

He took the card from his breast pocket and handed it to the station-master.

'Mr. Elsden, Briargate,' the man read aloud.

'Elsden,' said the doctor. 'I know an Elsden of Briargate—a big man with large white whiskers?' he interrogated, turning to the curate.

'No, this was a young man: pale, dark, good-looking.'

'Ah, I don't know who he can be. There'll have to be an inquest to-morrow morning, and the best thing we can do is to telegraph to Elsden, of Briargate, directly the office is open. Very strange that the lady's friends should not have appeared.'

'I shall lose my train,' cried George Caulfield, seeing the last lingerers hurrying to their places. 'Here's my card,' handing one to the doctor. 'You can communicate to me at that address. Any assistance that I can give——'

'Beg your pardon, sir,' said the constable, laying an authoritative hand upon him. 'I shall be obliged to detain you till this business is settled.'

'I shall be wanted as a witness at the inquest?'

'Yes, sir; most likely, sir. It will be my duty to detain you. Better not talk too freely, sir. Any statement you now make may be used against you later on.'

The curate looked at him in surprise.

'Do you mean to say that I am your prisoner—that you want to lock me up?'

'Well, yes, sir. Very suspicious case, you see. Young lady poisoned—friends not forthcoming. No doubt you'll be able to explain matters to-morrow; but for to-night you must consider yourself in custody.'

'Yes, of course I shall be able to explain,' said George Caulfield, calm and bold now that he found himself face to face with actual peril, 'but it is a most painful position. I feel that a trap has been set for me.'

'You had better hold your tongue,' said the doctor.

So the London mail left without George Caulfield, who was conveyed in a cab to Milldale Gaol, where he was subjected to the ignominious process of having his pockets searched by a gaoler. In one of them was found the little bottle given him by the gentleman at Grandchester, and this, together with a few other trifles, was handed over to the authorities for investigation.

CHAPTER II.

IN DURANCE VILE.

Instead of making any vain attempt at sleep, George Caulfield asked for pens, ink, and paper, and a lamp that would last him for the best part of the night; and on these luxuries being conceded, he sat down to write a long letter to his mother; relating all the circumstances of his miserable journey, and entreating her not to take alarm at his situation, whatever she might read about him in the newspapers. This letter, which would travel by the morning post, could be preceded by a telegram, informing the old lady that her son was safe, and detained at Milldale on business. Some hours of anxiety the son could not spare that beloved mother; and it was more painful to him to think of her trouble, when five o'clock came and brought no returning traveller, than to contemplate his own position.

'Dear old lady! I can fancy her and all her neat and careful arrangements for my comfort,' mused Mr. Caulfield. 'I know how distrustful she will be of the maids, and how she will insist upon getting up at four o'clock in order to see about my breakfast. And then when the time comes, and no hansom drives up to the gate, what agonies she will suffer, for I have never accustomed her to disappointments. I have never broken my word to her in my life.'

The curate fretted and fumed at the thought of his mother's anxiety. He was an only and an adoring son—at thirty-two years of age a confirmed bachelor, loving no one on earth as well as he loved the widowed mother whose cherished companion he had been from childhood upwards. Had she not removed her dearly loved goods and chattels to Eton, and lived in a small house in the High Street all the time her boy was at school there? Had she not followed him to Cambridge as faithfully as a suttler follows a camp? And now she had one of the prettiest houses in South Kensington, and her son was first curate at the most intensely Gothic church in that locality. George Caulfield's mother was the love of his life. He had been assisting at a choral festival at a small town near Grandchester, where an old college friend of his father's was vicar, and had been only three days away from the dainty little nest at South Kensington,

where blue china plates had just broken out, like pimples, on the sage green wall, and where the Queen Anne mania showed itself modestly in divers inexpensive details.

'Poor mother!' sighed George; 'a telegram can hardly reach her before nine o'clock at the earliest.'

He read his Tennyson; he dozed a little; he got rid of the night somehow, and at seven o'clock he had written and despatched two telegrams.

The first was to his mother, the second was to the vicar, from whom he had parted at eleven o'clock the previous morning, and to whom he was inclined to look for succour, as one of the cleverest and most energetic men he knew.

This latter message was brief:—

'From George Caulfield, Milldale Gaol, to Edward Leworthy, Freshmead Vicarage.—Come to me at once, for God's sake. I am in a great difficulty.'

Mr. Caulfield's janitor brought him a comfortable breakfast by-and-by, and was inclined to sympathise. He knew a gentleman when he saw one, he told the curate, though he had had to deal with a rough lot in this beastly hole. He had seen a good many murderers in his time, and the possibility of his prisoner's guilt made very little difference to his feelings. Guilty or not guilty, a man who was free-handed with half-crown pieces was entitled to respect. The difference between a half-crown and a florin was just the difference between your real gentleman and the spurious article. The actual amount was not much; but that odd sixpence marked the distinction.

This functionary informed Mr. Caulfield that the inquest was to take place at four o'clock that afternoon.

'Which gives you time to communicate with your solicitor,' he added, grandly.

'But I haven't any solicitor,' answered the prisoner. 'I never have had any law business in my life.'

'So much the better for you, sir,' responded the gaoler, sententiously; 'but you must have a lawyer to watch this here case for you.'

'I'll wait till my friend the vicar of Freshmead comes, and take his advice about it,' said George. 'I know he'll come as soon as the rail can bring him.'

His confidence was not ill-placed. Soon after noon Mr. Leworthy was ushered into his room. He was between fifty and sixty—a man with a countenance full of vivid intelligence, bright brown eyes, and grey hair, worn longer than the fashion. It was altogether a poetic head; but the man's

temperament fitted him for action and effort as thoroughly as his intellect gave him mastery in brain-work.

Such a friend as this was verily a friend in need. The two men clasped hands, and for the first minute George Caulfield was speechless.

'Tell me all about it,' said the vicar, sitting down by his friend's side with as cheerful an air as if it were a common thing for him to find a high-church curate in prison on suspicion of murder.

George Caulfield related his dreadful adventure of the previous night, the vicar listening intently, with knitted brows.

'It looks very like murder,' he said at last. 'The poor creature was carried to the station in a dying state, and that stertorous breathing you noticed when the train started was the last struggle. Don't be afraid, my dear boy; there's not the slightest reason for uneasiness. Our business is to find out all about this poor lady, and the man who placed her in the train. She must have been brought to the station in some kind of vehicle—cab, bath chair—something. The first thing to be done is to have inquiries made among the cabmen and cab proprietors. The police will do all that; but I shall have to watch your interests in the matter. You must have a clever lawyer, too, to watch the case. Brockbank, of Grandchester, will be the man—always about the criminal court there, up to every move. I'll telegraph for him instantly. The inquest is to be at four, you say. I must get it put off till five.'

'How good you are!' exclaimed George, 'and how clever!'

'I'm a man of the world, that's all. Some pious people think that a parson has no right to be a man of the world, forgetting who it was that told us to be wise as serpents. I'm not the popular idea of a parson, you know, by any means; but I can serve a friend as well as your strait-laced specimen of the breed.'

He was a man of abounding cheerfulness and infinite capacity for work, as prone to embellish his conversation with occasional flowers of modern slang now as he had been forty years ago at Eton. He was just the man George Caulfield wanted in this crisis of his life.

He telegraphed to the Grandchester attorney; and he got the inquest postponed from four till five. He saw the medical man; he talked to the police. A police officer had started for Grandchester by an early train to hunt up the owner of the card, and to obtain as much information as could be gc in a few hours.

The inquest was held at the chief hotel in Milldale, in a large dining-room, which was only used on civic and particular occasions. Here, under a blaze of gas, the curate of St. Philemon's, South Kensington, found himself for the first time in his life face to face with a British jury and a British coroner.

Mr. Hargrave, M.R.C.S., general practitioner at Milldale, declared that the deceased, name unknown, had died from the effects of a large dose of laudanum. There had been no *post-mortem*, and he saw no necessity for one. The colour of the face, the odour of the lips, the abnormal coldness of the corpse, were sufficient evidence as to the nature of the poison. The bottle found in the prisoner's possession contained laudanum.

Sensation!

The railway guard and station-master stated all they knew about the arrival of the deceased at Milldale Junction. Both described the prisoner as violently agitated.

The constable who had been sent to Grandchester was next examined.

He had found Mr. Elsden, of Briargate—a man of sixty, stout, grey, bald, in every attribute unlike the man described so graphically by Mr. Caulfield. Mr. Elsden had been able to offer no suggestion as to the stranger who had made such a shameful use of his card.

The constable had afterwards gone to no less than four cab-yards, where he had made all inquiries possible in a limited time. He had been unable to find any cabman who had driven an invalid lady to the station on the previous evening. He had next hunted out the only bath chair proprietor to be found in Grandchester, with the same result. Time had not allowed him to visit the numerous chemists' shops in that thriving city, and that remained to be done.

There was no evidence on Mr. Caulfield's behalf, except the vicar of Freshmead's evidence as to his character and antecedents, and to the fact that he only parted with him at eleven o'clock on the previous morning at the Freshmead Road Station. Freshmead was seven miles from Grandchester.

'What was Mr. Caulfield going to do when he left you?' asked the coroner.

'He was going to spend the day in Grandchester.'

'Has he friends or acquaintances in that city?'

'No. He was going to look at the cathedral and law-courts, and to spend an hour or two in the Oldbury Library.'

'He was to dine somewhere, I suppose?'

'He meant to dine at a restaurant. There are a good many dining-places in Grandchester; he could take his choice among them.'

After this witness had been examined, the inquiry was adjourned for a week.

At the close of the proceedings Mr. Brockbank, the lawyer, asked if his client might be released on bail, the vicar of Freshmead being prepared to offer himself as security to any amount, but the coroner replied that the case was of too serious a nature to admit of bail.

So Mr. Caulfield went back to the stony place whence he had come, where the utmost privilege that could be accorded him was the liberty to see his friends at stated hours, and to have his meals supplied from an adjacent hotel.

His spirits would have assuredly gone down to the point of utter despondency on that gloomy winter evening, when the mouldy fly that had conveyed him to the George Hotel carried him back to the gaol, had he not been supported and sustained by the indomitable cheerfulness of his friend the vicar.

'What do you think of the case now?' he asked.

'Think!' cried Mr. Leworthy. 'Why, that I shall have so much to do in Grandchester, ferretting out this mystery of yours, during the next six days that I don't know how the deuce my parish work is to get done.'

'Won't you employ the police?'

'Of course I shall; but I shall employ myself too. Don't you be down-hearted, George. I mean to see you safely through this business, and I shall do it right away, as they say on the other side of the Atlantic.'

George Caulfield's confidence in his father's old friend was unbounded. He had seen in the past how the vicar of Freshmead could conquer difficulties which the ruck of men would have found insurmountable. Mr. Leworthy dined with him as cheerfully as if they had been eating whitebait at Greenwich or turtle in Aldersgate Street under the most exhilarating circumstances; and stimulated by the force of example, George Caulfield, who had scarcely broken his fast since he left Grandchester, found himself enjoying the tavern steak and the tavern claret.

His friend left him soon after dinner to go back to Grandchester by the nine o'clock train; and then came a dreary interval until ten, when the prisoner lay down on his pallet bed and slept soundly, exhausted by the bewildering emotions of the last twenty-four hours. He was very downhearted now that he had before him the prospect of a week's solitude in

that miserable cell, for Mr. Leworthy had told him that he should not return to Milldale until the day fixed for the adjourned inquiry, by which time he hoped to have unearthed the man who had used Mr. Elsden's card.

An agitating surprise awaited Mr. Caulfield next morning. While he was breakfasting dismally upon tea and dry toast, the guardian of his solitude came in to tell him that a lady wished to see him.

'A lady!' cried the curate. 'There must be some mistake. I don't know a creature in the town. Pray don't let me be made a show of, to gratify any one's morbid curiosity.'

'Lord love you, sir, as if we should do such a thing! It's all right; the lady's got an order. She's a relative, no doubt.'

The man withdrew into the stony passage outside; then came a rustling sound George Caulfield knew well—a sweeping, stately step, and an elderly lady, grey and tall and slim, came quickly in and threw her arms round his neck.

'Mother,' cried the curate, 'how could you do such a thing?'

'How could I do anything else?' said his mother, striving heroically to be cheerful. 'Do you suppose I was going to stay in London after I received your letter? The postman brought the letter at seven, Sophia had my trunk packed by half-past, and Jane had a cab at the door—such good girls, and so anxious about you! I was at Euston by ten minutes past eight, and caught the train that leaves at eight-fifteen. I was at Milldale half-an-hour after midnight—too late to come here, of course, so I went to the nearest hotel. The chambermaid told me they were sending you your meals. I felt quite interested in them, and at home with them directly.'

She was a wonderful old lady, carried herself so bravely, spoke so brightly, looked at her son with eyes so full of confidence and hope. He would have been unworthy of such a mother had he not faced his position unfalteringly. They sat down side by side on the prison bench, and he told her all that had happened since he wrote his letter to her, and spoke as if nothing were more certain than his speedy justification.

CHAPTER III.

STAGE THE FIRST.

While George Caulfield was talking to his mother the vicar of Freshmead was plodding up and down the streets of Grandchester, eager, hopeful, determined to unravel the tangled skein of the nameless woman's fate. Who was she, what was she? Had she actually been murdered, and if so, for what reason? Who was the gainer by her death, and in what way?

Mr. Leworthy started at an advantage. Everybody in Grandchester knew him, and he knew everybody. The police were ready to confide in him freely. The local magistrates would be glad to help him. But on this occasion he was inclined to rely on his own wits. The police were at work for Mr. Brockbank's client. If they succeeded, well and good. But the vicar was not going to work with them.

His first visit was to the office of a daily paper, where he handed in the following advertisement:—'Missing, since November 30, a young lady; when last seen she wore a Rob Roy tartan shawl, a brown straw hat, and blue gauze veil. Any one affording information will be handsomely rewarded on applying to E. L., care of Mr. Brockbank, solicitor, Deansgate.'

This advertisement Mr. Leworthy took to the three local dailies.

His next visit was to Mr. Elsden, of Briargate.

'A man would hardly make use of another man's card unless he had some business or social relations with that other man,' reflected the vicar, as he tramped along, sturdy in bearing, determined in step. 'A man does not pick up a visiting-card in the street.'

He found Mr. Elsden elderly and plethoric, a man who rarely got through a business letter without stopping in the middle to mop his highly polished cranium with a crimson silk handkerchief. This gentleman was amiable, but not brilliant. He had read the report of yesterday's inquest, and was therefore posted in the facts: but he had no ideas to offer.

'How did that young man get hold of your card?

asked the vicar. 'He must have picked it up in some illegitimate way, unless he is among the number of your personal acquaintance.'

Mr. Elsden gave a supercilious laugh.

'I hope my friendships do not lie among secret murderers, he said.

'Of course, we all hope that, naturally; but one can never tell. My friend describes this young man as of gentlemanly appearance and good manners. Good-looking, too, quite an interesting countenance—pale, with dark eyes, silky brown moustache—what is generally called a poetic style of face.'

The Grandchester merchant seemed to retire within himself, and to be absorbed in profound thought. Presently he gave a sigh, and began to mop his polished brow and the barren arch above it, whereon no hair had grown for the last decade.

'I don't want to mix myself up in this business,' he said at last. 'It is sure to entail trouble.'

'As a Christian, as an honest man, you are bound not to withhold any information that can tend to exculpate the innocent,' urged the vicar, with some warmth.

'But how do I know that I can give any such information?' demanded Mr. Elsden, testily. 'If I give utterance to my ideas I may be only putting you on a false scent.'

'Better hazard that than withhold anything.'

'I know absolutely nothing. But your description might apply to a young man called Foy, who was in my employment three years ago.'

'What character did he bear when you knew him?'

'Excellent. He left me of his own accord, in order to improve his position. He was a talented young man—first-rate accountant, good linguist—and I had no situation to give him worthy of his talents. He left me to go to Kibble and Umpleby's, packers, in Deansgate, as corresponding clerk. I was only able to give him seventy-five pounds a year. He was to have two hundred at Kibble's. They do a great deal of business with Spanish America, and the French colonies, and they wanted a clerk who could write good French and Spanish.'

'I see. Do you suppose that he is still at Kibble and Umpleby's?'

'I have not heard the contrary.'

'Was this Mr. Foy a native of Grandchester? Had he family or friends here?'

'No. He was quite alone. I believe he was of French extraction. He used to boast that he was descended from some famous family called De Foix.'

'I should be very grateful to you if you could give me any further information about this young man.'

'What kind of information? My acquaintance with him never extended beyond my office. I know that he was clever. He was regular in his business habits, and I had every reason to suppose he was well-behaved. He brought me a letter of recommendation from a firm at Lyons with which I do business. I engaged him on the strength of that letter.'

'I see. Then he was a stranger in Grandchester. Something you can tell me, however—the house in which he lodged while he was in your employment. You must have known his address then.'

'Certainly,' replied Mr. Elsden; and then he put his lips to an ivory mouth-piece, and murmured some order down a gutta-percha tube.

Five minutes afterwards a clerk appeared with a slip of paper, which he laid before his employer.

'That is the address, sir.'

Mr. Elsden handed the paper to the vicar.

'There it is, sir. You see there is only one address, and the young man was with me nearly two years—an indication of steady habits, I think.'

'No doubt. I dare say Mr. Foy is a most estimable person. But I must find the dark-eyed, pale-faced young man who gave your card to my friend, and whether I find him in Mr. Foy's shoes or in anybody else's I'll make it rather hot for him.'

And with this unchristian speech the vicar took leave of Mr. Elsden.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MYSTERY OF ROSE COTTAGE.

Mr. Leworthy's next call was at Kibble and Umpleby's. Here he acted with greater subtlety. He asked to see the head clerk, and informed that gentleman that he had been recommended to apply there for a small service which he had been unable to get done anywhere else. He wanted a letter written to a correspondent at Cadiz, and he had not found anybody in Grandchester who knew enough Spanish to write such a letter for him. He had particular reasons for not writing in French or English, as his communication was of a strictly private character, and the gentleman to whom he had occasion to write understood no language but his own.

'I am told you have a clerk who is a first-rate Spanish scholar,' Mr. Leworthy said in conclusion.

'Quite true, sir. Our foreign clerk, Mr. Foy, knows Spanish as well as he knows French, and can write you as good a letter in Italian or Portuguese as in either. It's rather lucky you looked in this morning, though. To-morrow would have been too late.'

'Why? Is he leaving you?'

The clerk grinned.

'Only for a fortnight's holiday—rather an important event in his life. He's going to be married to-morrow morning—to the daughter of our junior partner, the youngest Miss Umpleby.'

'Oh, he is going to be married to-morrow morning! I congratulate him—and the young lady. Has it been a long engagement?'

'A year and a half. The old gentleman was very much against it at the first—thought his daughter might have looked higher—as of course she might, though she's one of a large family. But the firm had been pleased with the young man, and the young man had got a footing in the firm's houses, which is more than the common ruck of us do—unless it's a bit of a kick-up at Christmas-time, in a condescending way, which we may appreciate or may not, according to the bent of our minds. But this young Foy is musical, and he's half a foreigner, and those two things have stood him in good stead with the firm's families; and the

upshot of it all is that he's going to be married to the youngest Miss Umpleby the day after to-morrow.'

'Could I see him for a few minutes? I shan't detain him long.'

'Certainly, sir. I'm sure he'll be happy to oblige you,' said the clerk, who knew all about the vicar of Freshmead, one of the most popular men within twenty miles of Grandchester.

The clerk went to fetch Mr. Foy, and returned presently with that accomplished young man. The vicar was a student of character. He had not spent all his days amidst the green pastures of Freshmead. Seven years of his life had been devoted to preaching and teaching, and doing all manner of good works, in one of the vilest and most populous districts of East London. He had had plenty to do with scoundrelism in his time; he knew a scoundrel when he saw one, and his first glance at Gaston Foy convinced him that this young favourite of fortune was as dark a villain as ever wore a smooth face to gull the world.

Yes, despite his polished manners, his gentle and insinuating smile, and the oily blandness of his *legato* tones, the vicar made up his mind that this was the villain he wanted. This was the man who had brought his dying victim to the railway station and transferred the burden of his crime to a stranger.

George Caulfield had minutely described the man's appearance, and this man, in every feature, corresponded with that description. That he seemed perfectly happy and at ease did not surprise Mr. Leworthy. To a creature of this kind dissimulation is second nature.

The vicar stated his business, and sat down at the clerk's desk to write a rough draft of the letter to be translated, but after writing a sentence he stopped abruptly.

'It's a business that requires some thought,' he said. 'If you'll look in at my hotel this evening and let me dictate the letter quietly there I shall esteem it a favour. I won't keep you half-an-hour, and you'll be doing me an inestimable service.'

Mr. Foy looked at him rather suspiciously.

'My time is not my own just now,' he said. 'If you'll send me your letter I'll put it into Spanish for you, but I have no time to call at your hotel.'

This was said with a decided tone that settled the question.

'I see,' thought the vicar. 'He is not the man to walk into any little trap that I may set for him.'

'I'll send the letter to your private address this evening,' he said.

'You had better send it here. I live a little way out of Grandchester.'

The vicar assented, wished Mr. Foy 'Good morning,' and went away. Ten minutes afterwards he went back to Kibble and Umpleby's, saw the clerk he had seen first, and said:

'I may as well have Mr. Foy's address, in case I shouldn't be able to get my letter written before he leaves business.'

'Certainly, sir. Mr. Foy lives at Parminter—Rose Cottage, Lawson Lane.'

"Thanks. I may not want to send to him there, but it's as well to be on the safe side. Good morning.'

'Good morning, sir,' said the clerk aloud. 'Fidgetty old gentleman,' he ejaculated inwardly.

Parminter was a rustic village five miles from Grandchester. It did not lie in the direction affected by Grandchester merchants or Grandchester tradespeople. Here were no Gothic mansions, no fair Italian villas, springing like mushrooms from the soil—one year a confusion of lime and mortar tubs, stacked flooring-boards, and rough-hewn stone, and the next all smiling amongst geranium beds and ribbon bordering, velvet lawns and newly-planted shrubberies. None of the commercial wealth of Grandchester had found its way to Parminter. The village was still a village—a mere cluster of labourers' cottages, two or three old homesteads, and half-a-dozen small dwellings of a shabby-genteel type.

Among these last was Rose Cottage, a small, square house with plaster walls, bright with greenery and scarlet berries, even in this wintry season. A bow window below, rustic lattices above. Just such a house as a man with considerable taste and an inconsiderable income would choose for himself. The small garden in front of the bow window was in admirable order, yet the place had a deserted look somehow, Mr. Leworthy thought, as he rang the bell.

He rang once, twice, three times, with no more effect than if Rose Cottage had been a toy house inhabited by Dutch dolls. This was aggravating. There was a meadow on one side of the cottage, where half-a-dozen sheep were browsing contentedly. The vicar climbed the hurdle which divided this pasture from Lawson Lane, and went round to the back of the Cottage. Here there was a small garden, neatly and tastefully laid out, but there was no more appearance of human life at the back of the house than in the front.

'I suppose my gentleman comes home at night and lets himself in with a latch-key,' the vicar said to himself, much provoked at having travelled five miles without result.

He was climbing the hurdle on his return to the lane when a small girl, in a very short skirt, a girl of timid aspect, carrying a beer-jug, dropped him a curtsey, and said:

'Please, sir, was it you a-ringing of that bell just now?'

'Was it I?' ejaculated the vicar, impatiently. 'Yes, it was.'

And then, smiling on the small girl, for he had a heart large enough for ever so many parishes of children, he said:

'I am not vexed with you, my dear; I am angry with Fate. Tell me all you know about that cottage, and I'll give you half-a-crown.'

The girl gasped. She had never possessed a half-crown, but she had an idea it meant abundance. Her father counted his wages by half-crowns, and there were not many in a week's wage.

'Please, sir, Mr. Foy lived there with his sister, but they've left.'

'Oh, they've left, have they? When did they leave?'

'Last Monday sir, and the lady she was very ill, sir, and he took her away in a cab.'

'And Mr. Foy has not been back since?'

'No, sir. He left for good, and he gave the key of the cottage to my mother, and the agent is to put up a board next week, and the house is to be let. It was took furnished, and it's to be let furnished again.'

'Did they live quite alone? Had they no servant?'

'No, sir, never no reg'lar servant. Mother used to do the cleaning twice a week. Mother's very sorry they be gone. They was good to mother.'

'How long had they lived there?'

'Nigh upon a year.'

'And the lady was Mr. Foy's sister?

'Yes, sir.'

'And now take me to your mother.'

The girl looked wistfully at the jug.

'If you please I was to fetch father's beer, sir.'

'I see. And if you don't father will be angry?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Then you shall go—but first tell me where your mother lives.'

The child pointed down Lawson Lane. 'It's the last cottage, sir.'

'All right.'

Just where the lane straggled off into ploughed fields and open country, there was a row of labourers' cottages, and in the last of these Mr. Leworthy found a plaintive woman with a child in her arms, who owned to being the mother of the small girl with the jug.

The vicar wasted no time in preliminaries. He seated himself on an almost bottomless chair, and, with his stout umbrella planted between his knees, interrogated the matron thus:

'You used to work for Mr. Foy and his sister. What do you know about them?'

'Only that they paid me honourable for what I did, sir. I'm bound to up and say that whoever asks me.'

'Good. Did they live happily together as—brother and sister?'

Here the matron began to hesitate. She shifted her baby from one arm to the other. She gave a deprecating cough.

'I see,' said the vicar, 'they quarrelled sometimes.'

'I never see 'em, sir, for I scarce ever see Mr. Foy. He was off to Grandchester before I went of a morning, and he didn't come back till after I left. I used to go for the half-day, you see, sir, not the whole day. But I don't think the young lady was quite happy in her mind. I've seen her fretting, and people will talk, you see, sir—neighbours next door to Rose Cottage have heard them at high words, in summertime, when the winders was all open, or when they was in the garden.'

'I see. Had the sister been long ill?'

'No, sir. Not above a month.'

'What was the matter with her?'

'Well, sir, I can't say azackly. It was a sort of wasting sickness like. She couldn't keep nothing on her stomach of late, poor dear; and she had pains that racked her, and used to complain of a burning feel in her throat; out of sorts altogether, as you may say. I believe it all came from fretting.'

'Why did she fret so much? Was her brother very unkind to her?'

'No, sir. I don't think it was his unkindness that worried her. But he used to keep very late hours—hardly ever coming home till the last train, and that worried her. Not that he was ever the worse for drink. He was the soberest young man as ever was, but she was of a jealous disposition, and the thought that he was out enjoying himself with other people used to prey on her mind.'

'That was hardly fair, if he treated her kindly when he

was at home. A sister has no right to be jealous of a brother.'

'Perhaps not, sir, but jealous she was, and fret she did. "I've nobody but him in the world, Mrs. Moff," she said—my name being Moff—"and I can't bear him to be always away. There was a time when he spent all his evenings at home." And then the tears would roll down her poor holler cheeks, and it went to my 'eart to see her so miserable. I had a feller-feeling, you see, sir, for I know how it worrits me when my master stops late at the "Coach and Horses," on a Saturday night.'

'Ah, but it's different with a husband. A wife has a right to be exacting—not a sister. Now, tell me how they left the place, and all about it. I'm interested in this poor girl, and perhaps I may be able to befriend her. Where did they go?'

'He was going to take her to some place near the sea, on the other side of Grandchester, and a good way off. The name has gone clean out of my head. He was very kind to her from the time she fell ill. She told me so with her own lips. "Gaston was never so kind to me in his life," she says. He fancied it was the air here that didn't agree with her, she told me, and it is rather a relaxin' air, sir. I feel it so sometimes myself. There's times when I feel that low that if it wasn't for my drop of beer I should go off in a dead faint.'

'What kind of a young woman was Miss Foy? Was she like her brother?'

'No, sir, she were not. I never laid eyes on a brother and sister more unsimilar. She had been very pretty, there's no denying that, but her nervous worriting ways had that worn and preyed upon her that she was old and 'aggard before her time. She had light brown hair, and a fair skin and blue eyes, and I dessay she had been a pretty figure before she wasted away like, but her 'ealth were never good from the time I knew her.'

'Did you see her the day she went away?' asked the vicar.

'It wasn't a day, sir. She went late at night, by the last train to Grandchester. She was to sleep in Grandchester, and go on to the seaside next morning; and I do say that it wasn't the right thing for a young person in her state of ealth to travel late on a winter's night. But there, poor young feller, it wasn't his fault, for he had to be at the office all day.'

'She was wrapped up warmly, I suppose?'

'Yes, she wore a thick Scotch plaid shawl that he bought her the winter before.'

'Black and red?' said the vicar.

'Black and red,' assented the woman, with some astonishment. 'One would think you'd seen it, sir.'

'I told you I was interested in the young lady,' answered the vicar, vaguely.

He took out his memorandum book, and wrote down the date and hour of the young woman's removal from Rose Cottage. She had left in the one cab that plied between Parminter village and the Parminter Road Station. The cabman could be forthcoming if he were wanted, Mrs. Moff protested.

Mr. Leworthy rewarded this worthy woman with a crown piece, half of which he stipulated was to be given to the little girl when she came home from her errand; and then he walked briskly back to the station, which was a good half-mile from Lawson Lane. He was lucky enough to get a train in less than half-an-hour; and he was back in Grandchester at three o'clock in the afternoon.

Here he took a cab and drove straight to Mr. Brockbank's office, to whom he imparted all he had done.

'Upon my soul, you're a clever fellow, vicar!' cried the lawyer; 'you ought to have been something better than a parson.'

'You mean I ought to have been something that pays better. Now, look here, Brockbank, you must start off to Milldale by the first train, and get the coroner to order a *post-mortem*. No *post-mortem* necessary, forsooth, said that fool of a local surgeon, because the immediate cause of death was obviously laudanum. Why, it's clear to my mind, from what I've heard to-day, that this poor creature was slowly done to death by arsenic, and that the dose of laudanum was only given at the last to accelerate the end.'

Mr. Brockbank saw the force of this argument, and looked at once to his railway time-table.

'There's a train at 4.30,' he said; 'I can go by that. And now what are you going to do?'

'I shall call on Mr. Umpleby and try and stop to-morrow's wedding.'

'What motive can this Foy have had for getting rid of his sister?' speculated the lawyer.

'Very little motive, I should imagine, for getting rid of a sister. But what if the young woman was something more difficult to dispose of than a sister? What if she was his wife? These two young people lived quite alone in a country lane. It was easy for them to live as man and wife, yet pass for brother and sister. The charwoman's account shows that the poor girl was jealous and unhappy. She fretted on

account of Foy's late hours. They were overheard quarrelling. Take my word for it, Brockbank, that unfortunate young woman was a wife—a wife of whom Mr. Foy grew mortally tired when he found that it was on the cards for him to marry Miss Umpleby, with a handsome dowry, and the prospect of rapid advancement in the firm. Now I want you to set one of your clerks at work, without an hour's delay, to hunt up the evidence of such a marriage, either in a church or at a registry office.'

'It shall be done,' said Brockbank. 'Anything more?'

'Only this much. I have written an advertisement which will appear to-morrow in the three local dailies.'

He read the draft of his advertisement. 'This may bring us information as to the next stage in that poor young woman's journey after she left Parminter,' he said.

'Possibly. You really are a genius in the art of hunting a criminal.'

'No, sir, I am only thorough. I would do a good deal more than this to help any one I love. Now I'm off. I dare say you've some business to get through before you start for Milldale.'

'Only half-a-dozen letters to dictate,' answered the lawyer lightly, and then he put his lips to a speaking-tube and gave an order.'

'Send up the shorthand clerk, and have a cab at the door at a quarter past four.'

CHAPTER V.

'DELAY THIS MARRIAGE!'

Mr. Leworthy went back to Kibble and Umpleby's, and asked if Mr. Umpleby was on the premises. No, Mr. Umpleby had left half-an-hour ago, to return to the bosom of his family in Tolkington Park.'

Happily for the eager vicar, Tolkington Park was an adjoining suburb, where those well-to-do citizens of Grandchester who did not like the labour of daily railroad journeys contented themselves with a semi-urban retirement in villas of their own building, amidst shrubberies of their own planting, overlooking the towniest and most formal of public parks. It had long been a grief to the feminine Umplebys that, whereas other merchants' families of wealth and standing had Gothic mansions or Italian palaces set in richly wooded landscapes, remote from the smoke of the city, they had only the stereotyped surroundings of a thickly populated suburb, and were in no wise better off than their next door neighbours.

A cab with a horse of his own choosing drove Mr. Leworthy to the utmost limit of Tolkington Park in less than half an hour. He found the Umpleby mansion, which was called Mount Lebanon, although the ground on which it stood was as flat as a pancake, and there was not a cedar within a mile. It was a substantial, square house, with bay windows, a broad flight of steps, grandiose iron railings, painted dark blue, and surmounted with gilded pine-apples, and an all-pervading glare of plate-glass windows.

The hall was tesselated; the drawing-room was brilliant in colour, and painfully new. Here Mr. Leworthy sat waiting for the master of the house, while a young lady in an adjacent chamber favoured him with a solfeggio exercise, which strained to the uttermost a somewhat acid voice.

'I wonder whether that is the bride singing,' speculated the vicar, 'and I wonder if she is very much attached to my gentleman. Rather hard lines for her if she is fond of him, poor child!'

At last Mr. Umpleby appeared, plethoric, rubicund, pompous.

'Happy to have the honour of making your acquaintance, vicar,' he said. 'I have long known you by repute.'

'Every one in Grandchester does that,' answered Leworthy pleasantly; 'I have been too often in hot water not to be pretty well known.'

'Impossible to please every one,' murmured Mr. Umpleby.

'Precisely, and the man who tries it ends by pleasing no one. I have taken my own course; and though I've made a good many enemies, thank God I've made twice as many friends. Now, Mr. Umpleby, I must ask you to receive me with all good nature, and to believe that I mean well by you and yours, although I have come on a most unpleasant business.'

The merchant looked uneasy. Another great firm gone wrong, perhaps; a question of a big bad debt.

'Is it a business matter?' he faltered.

'No, it is a family matter.'

'Oh!' he said, with an air of relief, as if this were of minor importance.

'You are going to marry your daughter to-morrow?' said the vicar.

'I am.'

'To your clerk, Mr. Foy?'

'Yes, sir. It is not the first time that a merchant's daughter has married her father's clerk, I believe, though it is out of the common course of things.'

'I am here to beg you to postpone the marriage.'

'On what grounds?'

'Before I tell you that, you must give me your promise to communicate nothing I tell you to Mr. Foy.'

Mr. Umpleby hesitated.

'Mind, it is vital to you, as a father, to know what I have to tell.'

Mr. Umpleby gave the required promise.

The vicar told his story, beginning with the scene at the railway station, ending with the story he had heard at Parminter.

'Were you aware that Foy had a sister?'

'I never heard him speak of one.'

'Curious that, in your future son-in-law.'

Mr. Umpleby sat and stared into space like a man bewildered. He wiped his large, bald forehead with the biggest and most expensive thing in bandannas.

'This is a most frightful suspicion,' he said; 'a young woman poisoned, for you seem to think this young woman was poisoned. It is an awful position. Every arrangement

has been made for the wedding, as you may suppose—guests invited—some of the best people in Grandchester. My wife and daughters have the highest opinion of young Foy. I may say they are infatuated about him. His conduct in business has been irreproachable. There must be some mistake—some ridiculous misunderstanding.'

'I got Foy's address at your own office, and at that address I heard of a sister of whose existence you are absolutely unaware. Do you think that speaks well for your intended son-in-law?'

'He may have had some powerful reason for concealing her existence. She may be weak in her intellect. She may have gone wrong. As for your idea of slow poisoning, that is too absurd.'

'And you mean this young man to marry your daughter to-morrow morning?'

'What am I to do? I never cared about the match. I have been persuaded into giving my consent. My girl had a right to look higher. But to stop the marriage now would be——'

'Simply prudent. Investigate the case as I have put it before you. If I am deceived—if Foy is not the man who took that dying girl to the railway station—if Foy's sister, or a woman who passed as his sister, is not lying dead at Milldale, I will make the humblest apology to you and Mr. Foy for my baseless suspicions. You must take your own course. I want to save your daughter from sorrow and disgrace. Remember, you have been warned. If Foy is the man I take him to be the police will be dogging his heels to-morrow morning when he goes into the church to marry your daughter. Good afternoon. I have given you plain facts, and I have no time to spare for discussion.'

Mr. Umpleby would fain have detained him, but the vicar was in a hurry. He drove back to Grandchester, and to the headquarters of the police, to whom he repeated his story. They had been at work all day, and had done very little. They had discovered a porter at the station who remembered the arrival of a gentleman with a sick lady in a plaid shawl. They had seen the woman who took charge of the ladies' waiting-room, second class—always more crowded than the first class—and from her they had heard again of a sick lady in a plaid shawl, accompanied by a very attentive gentleman, but she could give no account of the personal appearance of either. The lady's face was hidden by a veil, and there had been so many people rushing in and out just at the last that there had been no time for her to observe these two, who

came in late. This much she knew, that the lady seemed in a kind of faint or stupor, and the gentleman had to carry her in his arms.

Once furnished with a clue, professional intelligence was quite equal to taking it up.

'This woman at Parminter must be taken to Milldale to identify the body,' said the chief official in the detective line, 'and we must watch this fellow Foy, so that he may not give us the slip.'

'He is to be married to his employer's daughter to-morrow morning,' said the vicar. 'To leave Grandchester before to-morrow would be tantamount to a confession of his guilt. It would be throwing up the cards altogether.'

'The symptoms you describe sound like arsenical poisoning,' said the officer, and then he and his colleague whispered together for a minute or so.

'I don't think there is anything more I can do to-night,' said the vicar.

'No, sir. You may leave everything in our hands.'

'Precisely. But remember, if you don't want this young scoundrel to be married to a respectable young woman at eleven o'clock to-morrow morning you'll have to look sharp.'

The vicar went back to the bosom of his family at Freshmead, thinking that he had done a pretty good day's work.

Before ten o'clock that night two facts had been discovered in the biography of Mr. Foy—first, that exactly three years before he had been married at a registrar's office to Jane Dawson, spinster, daughter of John Dawson, master mariner; and secondly, that he, or a man exactly answering to his description, had bought small quantities of tartar emetic, and small portions of laudanum, at divers times within the last two months, and at several chemists' shops in the obscurer streets of the great busy town.

These two discoveries the police communicated to Mr. Umpleby late on the vigil of his daughter's wedding.

The evidence of the marriage was indisputable. Much as Mr. Umpleby was inclined to discredit the charge brought against his intended son-in-law, he could not disbelieve the legal proof of the marriage before the registrar; and, convicted of having concealed a prior marriage, Mr. Foy's character appeared in a new and doubtful light.

'I'll put off the wedding,' cried Umpleby, who had spent the evening marching about his house and garden in a state of suppressed agitation. 'I won't have my daughter married to a liar and a trickster. There must be something wrong. There is no smoke without fire.'

He sat down directly the detective had left him, and wrote with his own hand to those Grandchester magnates who had been bidden to the wedding.

'Let these letters be delivered by special messenger before eight o'clock to-morrow morning,' he said to the respectable man-of-all-work, who had been yawning dismally in a pantry at the back of the hall; 'and let that letter be taken to Mr. Foy at the Crown Hotel.'

Foy was to stop at an hotel in Grandchester on the eve of his wedding, in order to be on the ground early.

Mr. Umpleby felt a happier man after he had done this deed. He went up to bed more at ease with himself, but he did not awaken his slumbering wife to tell her the unpleasant news. There would be a scene in the morning, of course, with all these women—hysterics, fainting-fits, recrimination, in which he, the husband and father, would get the worst of it.

Mrs. Umpleby's plum-coloured velvet gown, her brand new Honiton shawl, her white chip bonnet and ostrich feather, were lying in state upon the sofa. Would any woman forgive a husband for upsetting the festival at which those splendours were to be worn? There had been fuss enough about the gown, about the breakfast, about every one of the wedding arrangements; and now, lo and behold, the fuss had been all for nothing!

'I never liked him,' mused Mr. Umpleby. 'It was the women who talked me over. To begin with, the man's half a foreigner, and I want no *parlez-vous* in my family.'

His letter to Foy had been of the briefest.

'Look round the first thing to-morrow morning; I want to talk to you.'

The father was up betimes, too agitated to eat his breakfast. He carried his cup of tea to the study at the back of the dining-room, and paced that snug apartment, waiting for Mr. Foy. Upstairs there was wild excitement among the feminine part of the household, rushings and hurryings from room to room—spectral figures in long, white raiment and flowing hair, crimping, plaiting, hooking and eyeing. Here on the ground floor there was an awful quietude.

Presently Gaston Foy came in. He, who was usually so pale, had this morning a hectic spot on each cheek. He, too, shared in the general excitement. Looking at him closely, Mr. Umpleby saw that his lips were dry and white.

'Nothing wrong with Bella, I hope?' he asked, nervously. Bella was the bride.

No, there is nothing the matter with Bella, at present.

It is about yourself I want to talk. I think—when we first knew you—you told me that you stood quite alone in the world—that you were an orphan—had fought your own way in life—had not a living soul belonging to you?'

'All that is quite true,' answered Gaston Foy, looking straight at the questioner, with a face that showed no trace of emotion or surprise. 'Why discuss the matter this morning? It is not a cheerful subject.'

'You have deceived me,' said Mr. Umpleby. 'I am told you have a sister.'

This time the young man was palpably moved. Strong as he was in dissimulation his self-control failed him. For the moment he stood staring blankly at his accuser—speechless. Then he suddenly recovered himself, and looked at Mr Umpleby pleadingly, with a deprecating smile.

'You have found out my secret,' he said mournfully. 'It is a sorrowful one. Yes, I have a sister; yes, I have kept her existence a secret from you, and from all I love in this house. Poor girl! her life has been—is—a burden to herself and others. An invalid, almost an imbecile, my afflicted sister shrank from the world as the world would have shrunk from her. Had you seen her you might have been prejudiced, you might have regarded her as an obstacle to my marriage.'

'You ought to have told me the truth,' answered Umpleby sternly. 'I learn that a few days ago this girl was living with you at Parminter. You removed her from that place in a weak state of health. Where is she now?'

'At the seaside.'

'Where?'

'At Howcomb.'

He named a place at least fifty miles from Grandchester.

'Alone?'

'No; with friends of mine.'

Mr. Umpleby took a telegraph form from one of the drawers in his desk, and laid it on the blotting-pad.

'Write a telegram to your Howcomb friends at my dictation, to inquire about your sister's present condition. A few words will do. Thus: "I am anxious about my sister—please let me know how she is this morning. Answer paid." The reply can come here. Why do you hesitate?'

'Because your request implies suspicion. I shall send no such telegram. Why should you drag my poor suffering sister into this day's business? I have told you the truth about her. I have told you why I have hitherto concealed her existence from you and yours. Can you not allow me to forget her, at least for to-day?'

'No, Mr. Foy. I want to have positive proof that your account of this young woman is a true one. I want to know that she is—alive, and in safe hands. When we have settled that question I shall have to ask you another.'

The hectic spots had intensified on the young man's cheeks, leaving the rest of his face livid. He wiped his ashy lips with his handkerchief.

'What question?'

'I shall have to ask you about your wife; and when and how you became a widower. What have you done with the young woman, Jane Dawson, whom you married three years ago at the registry office in St. Swithin Street? Was she an imbecile too? Were you compelled to conceal her existence?'

'There is some mistake,' said Foy, recovering his resolute tone, but not his natural colour. 'I was never married in my life.'

'I have been shown a copy of the registry of your marriage, or the marriage of a man calling himself Gaston Foy, clerk, of Grandchester. The name is not a common one. Come, Mr. Foy, we need not prolong this argument. I never liked the notion of your marrying my daughter, though I submitted to it, to please my women-kind; but last night I made up my mind you should not marry her; and now, my young friend, there's the door. I wish you a very good morning!'

'This is strange treatment, Mr. Umpleby.'

'Not so strange as your own conduct.'

Gaston Foy took up his hat from the table, and left the room without a word. He was meditating what he should do with himself in the next hour. He was speculating whether he should have one hour free in which to extricate himself from a desperate predicament—whether he was not so hemmed round and beset with danger as to make all movement on his part full of peril.

He walked slowly out of the house, down the broad flight of steps. Just outside the iron gate of the garden a hand was laid upon his shoulder.

'I arrest you on suspicion of murder,' said a voice, and Gaston Foy knew that his course was run.

CHAPTER VI.

BROUGHT TO A FOCUS.

The day had seemed long to the prisoner in Milldale gaol, although he was cheered by the society of his mother, who spent all the time the authorities allowed in her son's gloomy apartment. It was a sight to see the brave-hearted old lady sitting opposite her son knitting a Berlin wool *couvre-pied*, and pretending to be as comfortable and as much at her ease as if she were in her pretty drawing-room at South Kensington. Not by so much as a quiver of her lip would she allow herself to betray her anxiety. Her heart was as heavy as lead, yet she contrived to smile, and kept up a cheerful flow of small talk about the past and the future—church affairs, the schools, the choir.

But even with this consoling company the dark winter day had seemed long to George Caulfield. He was feverishly expectant of news from Grandchester, and when none came he fancied that his friend, his lawyer, and the police, had alike failed in their efforts to let in light upon the mystery of that nameless girl's death.

And if the day seemed long, what of the dreary winter night, when imagination, excited by strange circumstances and strange surroundings, conjured up the horrors of a criminal trial—the crowded court, every creature in it believing him, George Caulfield, the murderer of a helpless girl. He saw the chain of circumstantial evidence lengthening out link by link, and he, the accused, would have no power to sunder those links. His lips would be sealed.

And then involuntarily there broke from his lips a cry of anguish :

'He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.'

He had spent a feverish night, given half to wakefulness, half to appalling dreams. He had risen and dressed himself as soon as it was light, and now he sat waiting wearily for some sign from the outer world, some cheering message, some word of hope. It was only two days since the vicar of Freshmead had left him, yet it seemed ages.

Hark! was not that the cheery voice he knew so well, the full vibration of tones that came from powerful lungs, the

clear utterance of a man accustomed to address multitudes? Yes, it was Leworthy's voice, assuredly, and that cheerful tone should belong to the bringer of good tidings.

He sat with his hands clutching the edge of his pallet, profoundly agitated, while the grating key turned in the lock, and the heavy cell door moved slowly back. Then the vicar rushed into the cell, and grasped his hands, and laid his hand upon his forehead in loving benediction.

'God bless you, my dear boy! You will not have long to stay in this wretched hole. The man who brought that poor creature to the station is arrested; he came here by the train I travelled in. He is now in this gaol. There will be a *post-mortem* to-day, the inquest will be re-opened on Monday instead of on Wednesday next, and the evidence then produced will prove his guilt and your innocence.'

'Thank God!' ejaculated George Caulfield, and then he fell on his knees beside the prison bed, and poured out the rapture of his soul in prayer and thanksgiving.

When he had finished that voiceless prayer he sat down quietly beside his friend to hear how the vicar had done his work, and how completely he had succeeded.

'Up to last night the evidence against my gentleman was only speculative,' he said, when he had described all that had happened in Briargate and at Parminter, 'but last night the police contrived to bring matters to a focus. Once having got a clue they worked marvellously well. They got hold of half-a-dozen photographs of this Mr. Foy who had been vain enough to get himself photographed at different times by all the leading photographers of Grandchester. Provided with these they went the round of the chemists' shops and found where my gentleman had bought poison. They traced him from lodging to lodging till they found him two years ago living in the outskirts of Grandchester with a weakly, nervous wife, whose description corresponded exactly with that of the weakly, nervous sister at Parminter. They obtained a photograph of this young woman, which had been given by her as a parting *souvenir* to the landlady, and this portrait Mrs. Moff, the Parminter charwoman, identified as a likeness of the so-called sister. This was bringing things to a focus, wasn't it?' inquired the vicar, giving his young friend a ferocious dig in the ribs.

'Decidedly.'

'They were brought still closer this morning, thanks to my advertisement for a missing young woman in a Rob Roy shawl. This morning an elderly female appears at Messrs. Brockbank's, solicitors—your solicitors, you know—and tells

them that she keeps a small public-house in Water Lane, a narrow street leading to the river, and within five hundred yards of the railway station, and to her house came a young man with an ailing young woman in a plaid shawl—Rob Roy pattern. They stayed there two days and two nights, and while they were there the young woman got worse, and was so ill that she had to be carried to the station, when the young man, who owned to being her husband, took her away. He was taking her to the seaside, he told his landlady—the doctor having said sea air would bring her round. The landlady's son, who was in the iron trade, helped to carry the poor young woman to the station. It was quite dark, and no one took much notice of them. This is why the police could get no information from cabmen or cabmasters, you see. Now, this good woman, the landlady, has been brought to Milldale this morning. She will see the corpse, and she will see Mr. Foy, and I hope she may be able to identify both. She has seen Foy's photograph, and recognised it, already. So the long and the short of it is, my dear fellow, that I think you're pretty comfortably out of this mess, and I hope you'll never do such a thing again.'

The vicar affected facetiousness, perhaps to hide the depth of his feeling. He loved his friend almost as well as he loved his own sons, and that is much, for the man's heart overflowed with love.

The inquest was re-opened on Monday, and the evidence against Gaston Foy was so complete in all its details that the jury had not a moment's hesitation in ordering the immediate release of George Caulfield, who left Milldale by an afternoon train and officiated at an evening service at St. Philemon's that night. How happy he and his mother were as they sat side by side in the railway carriage on the journey back to London!

'I think it will be a long time before I shall care to travel at night and alone,' said the curate. 'The memory of that awful hour between Grandchester and Milldale would be too vivid.'

The complete history of Gaston Foy, how he married a poor girl of humble station, and grew tired of her, soon after the birth of a child, whose death left the mother weakened in body and mind—how, when he found himself getting on in the world, received and made much of in the Umpleby household, he determined to get rid of his wife and marry Miss Umpleby, is all to be read in the criminal records of Grandchester, in which city the young man was tried for wilful murder, found guilty, and hanged within the prison walls a fortnight afterwards.

THE CLOWN'S QUEST.

CHAPTER I.

AFTER FIFTEEN YEARS.

A DINGY little room; whitewashed walls, hung here and there with flaming play-bills, printed in red, and blue, and black; a fireplace squeezed into a corner, a brace of battered old rush-bottomed chairs, a looking-glass hanging against the wall, a white crockery jug and basin—jug minus handle and deteriorated in spout, basin cracked—a flaming gas-jet, a saucer of vermilion, and another of bismuth, a collection of wigs in dilapidated cardboard boxes, a heterogeneous mass of garments hanging in a corner, a carpetless floor, a curtainless window, against whose grimy panes the March wind rattles fiercely.

This luxurious retreat is the dressing-room of Signor Grumani, the famous clown; and Signor Grumani himself sits before the coke fire, with his elbows on his knees, staring meditatively at the dull red glow. He has dressed early, and has half an hour to spare before his night's work begins. Faintly, far off in the distance of the large theatre, sounds the lively music of the fairy opening to the eminently successful pantomime of 'Harlequin Humpty Dumpty, the Little Old Woman who lived in a Shoe, and the Seventy White Elephants of the King of Siam.' It is the last night of the pantomime, and it is Signor Grumani's birthday.

The first fact fills him with profound satisfaction, for Signor Grumani is a prudent and respectable member of society, as well as the acknowledged prince of pantomimists, and he has saved enough money to be able to enjoy a period of rest after his labours. The second fact makes him thoughtful, and even sad.

A man must be of a shallow and frivolous temper who can contemplate his fortieth birthday without a touch of sadness. Few men there are who, at this half-way house on the high road of life, can look back upon the past with less reason for self-upbraiding than had John Groman, otherwise Signor Grumani.

What did the past show him, as he looked into the dull red fire, while the March wind shook the loose window-sash, and the March rain beat against the glass?

First, a snug back-parlour behind a jeweller's shop in a street off Holborn; a tender, homely mother; a sober, industrious father; a sunny-haired, blue-eyed brother, just one year his junior; decent habits, family affection, a humble, uneventful life. Secondly, a city day-school. Thirdly, a stool in an office.

That office-stool never suited Jack Groman. The genius of the born actor and pantomimist had shown itself long before this. He had been a pantomimist before he could walk—an imp full of queer tricks and sprite-like capers; and so it came about, after a little while, that Jack exchanged the office-stool for the sawdust of a circus, much to the regret of his parents. But the boy was good and true to the bottom of his heart, and stuck to the office until he obtained his father's reluctant consent to his new career.

From that hour John Groman's future was made. He lived in the golden age of pantomimists, when the pantomime was a legitimate and honoured feature of the drama, when old Drury thrilled with Homeric laughter at 'Hot Codlings,' and when a clever clown was accounted worthy of honour.

Before he was thirty Signor Grumani was one of the most celebrated men of his age, as well as one of the most respectable. At forty he had made a comfortable fortune, lived in his own house at Pentonville, had a fine collection of fancy pigeons, and cultivated an acre of garden.

The good old father and mother were both gone. They had lived to share their elder son's prosperity, and to exult in his fame; but the inexorable doom had overtaken them, and, though blessed with a loving little wife and troops of friends, looking back at the past, on this fortieth birthday, John Groman felt himself a lonely man.

The knell of our youth is sounded when we have lost those we loved while we were young.

And the blue-eyed, bright-haired brother. What of him?

That is the saddest memory in John Groman's past. He always thinks of his brother Ted on his birthday. Never had brothers loved each other more truly than those two. There had been a sympathy between them almost as subtle as that which sometimes exists between twins, an affection rare among men. And now John looked back and thought of his brother as of the dead. He had so little hope of ever seeing him again upon earth.

Edward was full of talent, and had begun brilliantly as shopman at a West-end jeweller's. His good looks and gentlemanlike manners had made him at once popular and valuable. He had a persuasive tongue, and was speedily known as a first-rate salesman. With women he was supposed to be irresistible; from the duchess, before whose languid eyes he displayed a riviére of diamonds, to the milliner's apprentice, who wanted a cheap breast-pin for her lover.

For the first five years of his commercial life he did well, and his father and mother were prouder of the West-end shopman than of the circus-clown; but, just as Jack was leaving the circus for the theatre, and beginning to make himself famous, Ted took a turn for the bad.

Nothing was distinctly known. Those who knew him best said there was a woman at the bottom of it, and even named the woman. John knew something of her, but very little. One black Monday Edward Groman was missing, and a diamond bracelet, worth three hundred pounds, was missing at the same time. The evening's post brought a heartbroken farewell to the miserable mother, but no word of explanation.

'If ever you see me again, mother, I shall be an honest man. I mean to pay back what I have taken, if God lets me live long enough. Try not to think of me as a thief, but as a man driven by hard necessity, and the bitter need of one he loves better than himself.'

'Dear Edward!' sobbed the fond mother; 'he always wrote such sweet letters.'

And it seemed to this loving soul that a young man who could write so well could hardly do wrong. But the father was of sterner stuff, and his son's dishonesty crushed him. He was never quite the same man after that bitter Monday.

John Groman paid Messrs. Cabochon the price of that diamond bracelet out of his second season at Drury Lane. Three years later he received a polite note from the firm, informing him that a letter had reached them that day

from New York, containing bank-bills to the amount due to them, with interest to date. They had much pleasure in handing the principal and interest to Mr. Groman.

And in all these years not a word had come to Signor Grumani from that scapegrace brother of his. It was more than ten years since Messrs. Cabochon had received the bank-bills. Jack had made up his mind that his brother Ted had ended his wanderings long ago.

'He was too fond of me to have kept silence all this time if he was not silent for ever,' thought Jack, as he bent shivering over the dull coke fire. That bleak March wind sent ice-cold arrows against his back.

He had thought the same thing many a time, and nothing had ever come of the thought. Every birthday for the last fifteen years, and on many days that were not birthdays, his mind had dwelt upon the dear companion of his youth, and nothing had ever come of it. No messenger from the other world had come to tell him that his brother was verily lost to him; no ray of hope had ever pierced the darkness that veiled the wanderer's fate.

Jack repeated the words dreamily, like an old song.

'He was too fond of me to keep silence, unless he was silent for ever.'

Suddenly came a sound that thrilled him. The voice of a spirit could not have moved him more. Some one whistled an old, old, familiar, fireside tune just outside his door—a tune he had never heard sung or whistled since he lost his brother—the tune which Edward Groman used to whistle softly to himself when he bent over any task that needed special thoughtfulness and care.

'My God!' cried Grumani, starting up from his chair. 'That's my brother Edward!'

The door was dashed open, and a man came in, tall, bearded, bright-eyed, clad in rough warm clothes, smelling of the sea—a man who threw his arms wide open, and cried:

'My blessed old Jack, I made up my mind to come home on your birthday!'

And then the two men hugged each other and clung to each other in a way that was possibly un-English, but which was distinctly human.

'My dearest Ted!'

'My brave old Jack!'

'Where have you been all these years?'

'Everywhere: all over the world, from pillar to post.'

'Oh, Ted, why didn't you write to me?' asked John, with tender reproachfulness. "How many a heartache you might have saved me if you had only written!'

'I was a fool and a brute,' said Edward, looking very much ashamed of himself for the space of a second, and then brightening suddenly, just in his old happy-go-lucky way. 'But, you see, I always meant to come home, and I felt somehow that I couldn't say what I wanted to say in a letter. Sometimes things looked black, and I didn't care to tell you how low I had got in the world; then, when the tide turned and good luck came, I wanted to come home unawares, as I have to-night, dear old boy, and surprise you. But I sent the money for that—infernal bracelet.'

'Yes, Ted, I was glad of that. Oh, Ted, my own true-hearted brother, how could you——'

'How could I turn thief? It wasn't like my father and mother's son, was it? I'll tell you how it was, Jack. I saw the woman I loved in bitter need—bailiffs in the house, ready to take the bed she slept on—she ill and helpless—the husband who should have cared for her leaving her to her fate, and I—I—that had never had so much as a kiss from her dear lips since she was a wife—the only friend she had to look to in her misery. And I had that cursed bracelet in my waistcoat-pocket to take to a fine lady in May Fair. I took it to Attenborough's instead, Jack, and I gave that poor girl the money. And then, feeling that I was a ruined, blighted wretch, and had brought shame upon my honest father, I went straight down to the docks and engaged myself on board an East Indiaman as an able-bodied seaman.'

There was a loud knock at the door, and a shrill boyish voice called, 'Signor Grumani: Transformation scene.'

'I must be on the stage in three minutes, and I sha'n't be off it above five minutes at a time till the end of the pantomime. Will you sit here and wait for me, Ted, or will you go round to the front?'

'Neither. I'll come back when it's all over, and if you like to take me home with you——'

'Like to take you, Ted! My home shall be your home as long as I have a roof to shelter me.'

'I won't impose on your generosity, Jack. The tide turned five years ago, and things have gone smoothly with me ever since. I have come home to you a rich man. Look at these.'

He took a couple of little canvas bags from his pocket and showed them to his brother.

'Do you recognize those, Jack?'

The clown shook his head.

'Diamonds, Jack, diamonds! I came home by Amsterdam, and put all my money into the raw material. The

dear old dad used to say that a man could never lose money in diamonds if he knew anything about them; and I flatter myself I'm a pretty good judge. There's a small fortune in those two bags, Jack. I mean to get fifty per cent. upon my capital out of the West-end jewellers. I wasn't three years with old Cabochon for nothing.'

All this was spoken hurriedly. Jack Groman longed to hear more, and yet must needs tear himself away. Another minute and the stage would be waiting for him.

'When did you get to London, Ted?' he asked, breathlessly.

'Last night. I've been looking up old haunts all day, and,' with a stifled sob, 'I've been to see—*their* grave. I had made up my mind to come upon you unawares to-night.'

'And you are not afraid of going about with all that property in your pocket?'

'I shouldn't be afraid of carrying the crown jewels. Nobody knows that I've got anything worth stealing, and I don't carry them where they could be taken easily.'

'You'll be sure to come back for me, Ted?'

'Without fail.'

'And we'll go home together. Rose Cottage, Pentonville. That's my place, Ted, and I've the nicest wife in England.'

'You deserve her. I shall be back in an hour.'

And so, with a hearty hand-clasp, they parted; and Signor Grumani rushed down a breakneck-staircase, burst into a blaze of gas, and tumbled on the stage just in the nick of time. He had never disappointed the British public in his life, and he would have been sorry to begin, even to-night, albeit his heart was thumping against his ribs with the strongest emotion he had ever felt since the day he was told his brother was a thief.

He went through all the old familiar tricks and buffooneries, the antics, the deliciously comic grimaces, and the people laughed at him as heartily as ever; but the lights and faces, the gilding and colour of the theatre were spinning before his eyes all the time—the music had a far-off sound—the well-known faces in the orchestra looked strange.

'Upon my soul,' said Signor Grumani, 'I believe everybody's drunk, and I'm the drunkest of all.'

CHAPTER II.

MISSING.

THE Clown's last caper was performed; his last broad grin had illuminated the house, like the jolly red-faced sun laughing at the world before he drops behind the broad green hills; and John Groman was his own master again. For three months he had been the nightly slave of the public. Now he was free to go where he liked and do what he pleased, till he took upon himself other bondage.

'What a jolly time Ted and I will have,' he said to himself, as he ran up the steep stairs and along the narrow passages to his dressing-room.

The sulky coke fire had gone out altogether, and the room was empty. Jack Groman looked round disconsolately. He had expected to find his brother waiting for him.

'He said he'd be back in an hour,' he thought; 'and it's full an hour and a half since he left me. Just your old way, Master Ted. Never punctual!'

He began to undress quickly, so that he might be ready to go home with that scapegrace brother of his. He washed the bismuth and vermillion off his honest face, he put on the sober garments of every-day life, and Signor Grumani was transformed into plain John Groman, a well-built man of middle-height, lithe, active-looking, with homely features, an intelligent countenance, dark hair cut short, closely shaved cheek and chin, good broadcloth, and a general appearance of extreme respectability. You might have taken him for a prosperous lawyer, or a doctor with a good practice—for anything or everything except a clown.

It took him a quarter of an hour to dress. The lights in front of the house had been out ever so long—the theatre was as quiet as an empty church.

'I can't wait for him here,' said John Groman. 'They'll be locking up the stage-door and shutting me in.'

He went down to the stage-door, hoping to find his brother waiting for him in the dismal lobby, where aspirants for dramatic renown sometimes waited for engagements—and did not get them—where the imps and fairies of pantomime congregated on Saturday afternoons, unkempt and dirty, and smelling of old clothes.

No, Edward was not in the hall. The door-keeper had seen a strange gentleman go out 'nigh two hours ago,' and had not seen him come back, and the door-keeper was positive that nobody could pass him 'unbeknown.'

There was nothing to do but to go out and wait in the street for the truant. The door-keeper wanted to lock up the theatre and to retire to his den. So John Groman buttoned-up his comfortable overcoat, pulled his muffler over his chin—clowns are as careful of their lungs as tenors—and went out into the windy night.

There was a colonnade outside the stage-door, and there was a public-house on the other side of the street. The lights within had a comfortable look.

'I wonder if the fellow has gone into the Anchor?' thought John.

He ran across, and looked into the bar, and even peered into the parlour. No Edward. John was out in the street again in a minute. He began to feel feverishly anxious lest he should miss his brother.

'I told him my address,' he said to himself. 'Can he have taken a hackney-coach, and gone home without me?'

That seemed an unlikely proceeding, so John determined to stick to his post, under the colonnade. It was only a question of waiting for half an hour or so. It was nearly one o'clock. The most unpunctual of men could not delay his return much longer.

One o'clock struck, and the quarter after, from the church clocks of the neighbourhood, and still John Groman waited. A chill uncomfortable feeling had crept over him since the striking of the hour. It seemed mere foolishness now to wait for his brother. It was not likely Ted would come back to the theatre that night.

'He talked about looking up old haunts,' mused Jack; 'perhaps he has gone to see some of father's old friends. The Tomkinsons, for instance. Their place isn't very far from here.'

John Groman went off at once to see if this notion about the Tomkinsons were not a happy idea. He was flurried and eager, and had a kind of desperate feeling that he must find his brother before those sonorous church clocks struck two.

There was something queer and uncanny in this disappearance of Ted's. It began to appal him.

'It isn't kind of him to play me such a trick,' he thought. 'He must know how anxious I am to talk to him.'

Tomkinson's place was a rather dingy-looking house, over a tobacconist's shop, in a narrow street between the Strand

and the river. The Tomkinsons and the Gromans had enjoyed that comfortable kind of friendship which finds outward expression in tea and muffins, hot suppers after the play, and homely Christmas or New Year festivities beside the domestic hearth, rum punch, oysters, bottled stout, and conviviality.

Mr. Tomkinson's windows were dark. There was no sign of conviviality to-night. John Groman rang the door-bell loudly in his agitation, and presently a second floor window was opened, a head thrust out, and a sharp voice asked, crossly,

'What's the matter now?'

'It's only I, Susan. Mr. Groman, you know. Is there anybody with your master?'

'Master and missus have been abed these three hours,' answered the girl. 'I beg your pardon for speaking so cross, Mr. Groman, but this is the second time I've been scared by that blessed bell. There was a gentleman here an hour ago, who wanted master, but he wouldn't have him waked, and said he'd call to-morrow.

'What kind of a gentleman?'

'Tall—bigger than you—with a beard. He looked like a foreigner, but he spoke like an Englishman.'

'Which way did he go?'

'That way,' answered the girl, pointing towards the Strand.

'Are you sure it was an hour ago?'

'I can't be sure to a minute. It might have been an hour and a half.'

'Or two hours,' suggested John Groman.

'I can't say. Shall I call master, sir?'

'No, no, on no account. I'll look in to-morrow.

The girl shut down the window, and John Groman turned his face to the Strand.

'There can be no doubt about it,' he thought. 'Ted must have gone straight to Rose Cottage, after leaving the Tomkinsons.'

It was just like his brother to steal a march upon him, and go bursting into the quiet little cottage, looking as rough and fresh as the March wind.

'What a surprise for my little woman!' the Clown said to himself.

Yet, though he told himself this might be, there was a leaden weight at John Groman's heart as he plodded manfully northwards, piercing his way across a labyrinth of streets towards the Gray's Inn Road, cutting off corners, going almost as straight as the crow flies

The clocks struck two as he skirted the Foundling—two sonorous strokes that seemed to beat upon John Groman's heart.

'I thought I should have found him before two o'clock,' he said to himself; 'but I'll be bound he's in my parlour, making friends with the little woman.'

A belated hackney coach passed just at this moment. John Groman hailed it, and had himself driven home.

At Rose Cottage he found a bright fire, a cosy round table neatly laid for supper, a cheery copper kettle spitting and hissing on the hob, with a view to Jack's nightly glass of whisky-toddy, and a tearful little woman almost ready to go into hysterics on her husband's shoulder.

'Oh, Jack, what a fright you have given me!' she cried, smiling at him through her tears. 'I thought something had happened.'

'Something has happened,' he answered, looking anxiously round. 'Where's my brother?'

'Your brother?'

'Yes, Fan. Come, no larks. You're hiding him, I know.'

Mrs. Groman stared at her husband in sudden terror. Could he, the soberest of men, have been drinking? That was hardly possible. Yet, what but drunkenness or sudden lunacy could account for his wild demeanour?

'Fanny, for God's sake, tell the truth. My brother Ted is here, isn't he?'

'Oh, Jack, do you think I'd deceive you? There's not a mortal been here this night. What has put your poor brother into your head? I daresay he's dead and gone, poor fellow, years ago. You'd have heard of him if he were still alive.'

'Fanny, don't!' cried John Groman, dropping into a chair. 'I've seen him to night. He came back to me on my birthday. I was to have brought him home to you, and we were to be so happy together.'

Here John Groman broke down. He laid his head against his wife's honest heart, and sobbed aloud.

'John, dear John, why should you be so frightened about him? He'll be here presently, I daresay. Tell me all about it, how it happened, and where you saw him, and everything. You'll feel happier after you've told me," concluded the little woman, with as patronising an air as if she had been the goddess of wisdom.

John Groman told his tale briefly, and in a tone that was almost despairing.

His wife thought the circumstances were queer, but pretended to make light of them.

'Perhaps he intended to play you a trick, dear,' she said, soothingly. 'You know he was always wild. I've heard you says so. Or, perhaps some of his old companions got hold of him, and would not let him keep his appointment with you.'

'That's what I fear most of all, Fanny. My brother's old companions were a bad lot. I have bitter reason to know that. And to-night he carried property about him worth a thousand pounds. Heaven help him if he has got among his old companions! Something bad will come of it.'

'Why, John, what a raven you are. Come, cheer up, dear. I've got you such a nice little supper, a regular birthday supper—a boiled fowl and oyster sauce.'

John Groman was not in a mood to be consoled by fowl and oyster sauce. He made a pretence of eating his supper to please the 'little woman.' Then he sent her to bed with a kiss and a cheery word, and when she had gone he opened the shutters, drew up the blind, and let the light of fire and candle shine out upon the dark windy road. There was only a long strip of garden between the footpath and the parlour window.

'If he comes he shall see the light, and know that I'm waiting up for him,' said John Groman.

He waited till his candles took a sickly hue in the grey March daylight; waited till the shrill cry of 'milk below' sounded in the cold morning street, and the industrious little maid-of-all-work came down and opened the house-door, and shook out her dusty mats, and set vigorously to work with a clattering pail and a lump of hearth-stone. Mrs. Groman was a housekeeper who required extreme neatness and precision in all her domestic arrangements; and the clown was wont to brag of Rose Cottage as a model dwelling, where you might have hunted all day long for a spider or a cockroach, and where a cobweb would have been more astonishing than a ghost.

CHAPTER III.

'THERE'S A WOMAN IN IT.'

BEFORE the table had been laid for the eight o'clock breakfast, John Groman was in Bow Street, asking the advice of the police about his missing brother.

The constable to whom he told his story was an old hand—a man of few words and decided opinions.

'Don't you think your brother's larking with you?' he asked.

'He is not capable of such a thing. Think how cruel it would be to come back to me after fifteen years, and to trifle with my love for him. No, it isn't in Ted Groman to do it.'

'On the drink, perhaps?' suggested the constable.

'He was never a drinking man.'

'His habits may have changed in fifteen years Plenty of time for a man to go to the bad. If he's not on the drink, and not larking, the case looks dark. A man on the loose in London with a thousand pound's-worth of diamonds in his pockets! It looks bad. You'd better advertise in the *Hue and Cry*.

'Yes. But is there nothing I can do myself?'

'Not much, I'm afraid. You may hunt among his old pals. I daresay there's a woman at the bottom of it.'

John Groman remembered the diamond bracelet, and inclined to agree with the constable.

'Do you know of any woman he was sweet on before he left England? Fifteen years, though! He may have been sweet on a dozen women in that time.'

'I think he's more likely to have been constant to the memory of one,' said John Groman, who knew just enough about that fatal attachment of his brother's to know that the wound had been deep.

'Do you? Well, rely upon it, there's a woman at the bottom of it. Do you want to offer a reward?'

'Yes,' answered Groman. 'A hundred pounds to the man who brings me my brother safe and sound; fifty to the man who brings me tidings of him!'

'That's liberal,' said the constable. 'Unless I'm mistaken, I have the honour of talking to Signor Grumani.'

'You are not mistaken.'

'Sir, allow me to shake hands with you, exclaimed the constable, with deep respect. 'This is the proudest moment of my life. My name is James Wormald, and I've been a playgoer from my boyhood. That trick of yours with the old woman and the umbrella is the finest thing that has ever been done in the British drama. There's nothing in Shakespeare to beat it. Keep your heart up, Signor Grumani. You're a popular man. Whatever the constabulary of this city are capable of doing will be done for you. And now, perhaps, you can give me a little information that may put me on the right track as to your brother's old acquaintance, and so on. The lady to whom he was attached, for instance.'

'It was an unfortunate affair," said Groman. 'She was the daughter of a neighbour of ours, a lawyer's clerk——'

'That sounds artful,' observed the constable. 'I don't like he law in its subordinate branches.'

'Ted and she were sweethearts as children. She was a lovely creature. I don't think I ever saw a more beautiful face, but she was very small and slight, and there was something wrong about her figure. It wasn't much: a stranger would hardly have noticed it; but I used to think sometimes that there was an ugly twist in her mind just as there was in her body. Something crooked somewhere.'

'Was she fond of your brother?'

'Passionately, as he was of her. Yet she would quarrel with him about the veriest trifle, and sulk for a fortnight at a stretch. Then they would make it up, and she would be all sunshine. One day they had a quarrel that was more desperate than any they had ever had before. My brother came home looking white and agitated. 'I've done with that little wild cat for ever,' he told me. 'What do you think, Jack, she took the locket I gave her off her neck, the locket I made myself—and you know how hard I pinched to buy the pearls I set round it—and chucked it out of the window into the muddy road, just under a brewer's dray that was passing. 'Very good, my lady,' says I, 'you've thrown away your locket, and you've thrown away your lover. You've seen the last of us both.'

'Serve her right,' said Wormald. 'I hope he stuck to his word.'

'He did,' answered Groman, 'for a fortnight, and then he got a letter, signed Clara Valaority, to tell him that she'd married Mr. Valaority, the Greek picture-dealer of Rupert Street, who could afford to keep her like a lady, and she wrote those few lines to bid him good-by, and to give him her best wishes. Ted was like a madman

after he got that letter. He raved and raged, swore he would murder Clara and her husband. 'False, abominable girl!' he cried; 'if I cannot be happy with her I'll be hung for her.'

'But, of course he didn't do it,' said the constable.

'No. He bore the loss of her somehow, as we all bear our troubles, because we must. He had just taken a situation at a West-end jeweller's, and he was working very hard, and getting on very fast. His employers had a wonderful opinion of him. But I know he never left off grieving for Clara. She used to pass our shop sometimes of a fine afternoon, on her way to her father's lodgings, dressed like a duchess; but I didn't think she looked happy. Things went on like this for more than two years. Ted's salary had been raised from seventy pounds a year to a hundred and fifty. He dressed like a gentleman, and helped the dear old father and mother with many a five-pound note. I don't believe he had a particle of vice in his composition. One day I met Mrs. Valaority's father. He was in great distress, and told me his troubles. The Greek had gone all wrong. The place in Rupert Street had been sold up, and Valaority and his wife were in a wretched lodging at the back of Clare Market. Valaority was a gambler and a profligate, according to the old man's account, and his young wife was miserable. I was foolish enough to tell my brother what I had heard.'

'And he went to the lodging behind Clare Market to comfort his old love, I suppose,' suggested the constable.

'How did you know that?'

'I know human nature.'

'I heard nothing more directly of Mrs. Valaority; but indirectly I heard that my brother had been seen with her. His old steady habits were given up; he began to stay out late at night. He had his latch-key, and was his own master as to coming in and going out. I used to hear him come in far on in the small hours. He was always short of money now, poor fellow, and, instead of helping the old people with a five-pound note, was glad to come and borrow one of me. Sometimes he seemed unnaturally lively; at other times he looked miserable. We all felt at home that there was something wrong. I had many a talk with him, and tried my hardest to get him to trust me with his troubles, but it was no use. And one day there came—well, there came a crash, and Ted left England.'

'Bolted with the lady?' inquired Mr. Wormald.

'No. She stayed behind.'

'Do you know what kind of life he led abroad?'

'No. But I'll be sworn it was an honest one. I could see that in his face last night.'

'And he told you that he had been hunting up old friends?'

'Yes.'

'And he is a confiding fellow, easily influenced, open-hearted, open-handed?'

'Yes.'

'Then I wouldn't mind laying a wager that those Valaoritys have got him. A Greek picture-dealer, sold up fifteen years ago, living by his wits ever since. That's a man to stick at nothing. And your brother would be proud of having made his fortune, and would show his bags of diamonds! Of course. Yes, the Valaoritys have got him.'

'But, remember, there can be no friendship between my brother and Mr. Valaority.'

'Perhaps not; but there's a strong friendship between him and Mr. Valaority's wife. She'll have got pretty well toned down to match the colour of her husband by this time. When once a woman takes the downward turn, she goes very fast, pretty dear. I wouldn't give much for Mrs. Valaority's respect for the laws of property. Take my word for it, Signor Grumani, she and her husband have got those diamonds.'

John Groman remembered the bracelet, and his heart sank within him.

'Do you think they have murdered my brother?' he gasped.

'I haven't come to that yet awhile—I think they've got the diamonds.'

'But if my brother were alive, plundered, duped even, surely he would come to me? Who else would be so ready to pity and help him?'

'He might not care to let you know he had been fooled. What we've got to do is to find the Valaoritys.'

'And the diamonds.'

'Find them? You might just as well go and look for so many drops of water in the sea. They're on their way back to Amsterdam by this time, I daresay, or snugly reposing in paper at a respectable house in Hatton Garden. You needn't hope to see that stuff again. But if you want to find your brother we had better hunt up the Valaoritys.'

'Is it not as likely that a stranger may have robbed him?'

'No. He might be weak enough to display his property to an old acquaintance; but he would hardly be such a

simpleton as to brag of it to a stranger. Now you go home, Signer Grumani, and make your mind easy. We'll find the Valaoritys.'

'Let me help you. I'm a free man. I couldn't rest at home. Your reward shall be just the same, but let me help—let me look for my brother.'

'With all my heart,' answered the constable. 'You're too great an artist not to know how to keep a silent tongue. I shall be proud of your company.'

The constable retired to arrange his affairs with the head of his department, and John Groman sat down in the dingy office to write a letter to his wife—a loving, honest letter—telling her what he was going to do, and begging her not to be uneasy about him should he be obliged to remain absent from home for a night or two. He did not know whither his quest might lead him, or how long it might detain him.

'Now,' said the constable, coming back, after an absence of a little more than an hour, dressed in plain clothes, and looking like a country gentleman or a well-to-do grazier, 'the first thing to be done is to find out where these Valaoritys live. You've no idea, I suppose.

'Not the slightest.'

'Do you know any one connected with them?'

'There's Clara's father. He was an old man fifteen years ago, but he's one of that class of people who never die. They are old, and shrivelled, and dirty when you first know them; and they never get a day older, or a shade dirtier, in the course of your lifetime.'

'I know the breed,' answered the constable. 'They come to their oldest and ugliest early in life, and leave no margin for deterioration.'

'I passed the old man in Holborn the other day. We shall just get to his lodgings by one o'clock. He used always to dine at home, and I don't suppose he has changed his habits.'

'Not he, sir, no more than a snail. Life is a fixture with that breed.

Things fell out as John Groman had anticipated. They got to the dull side-street out of Holborn at the stroke of one, and found the old clerk ruminating over a plate of beef sausages and a pint of porter, a dirty newspaper propped up in front of him against a rickety cruet-stand, much the worse for mustard.

He received John Groman expansively, and was gracious to John's companion, who was introduced as a friend from

Essex; but he reproached the clown for not having sent him an order for Harlequin Humpty Dumpty.

'There was a time when you used to remember an old acquaintance,' he said.

'I'm very sorry I forgot you, Mr. Clews, especially as I want you to do me a service,' replied John Groman. 'I've a notion that there's been a kind of occasional correspondence carried on between your daughter and my brother Ted, and that Mrs. Valaority could tell me something about him if she liked. Now, I'd give a great deal to know where he is and what he's doing, and I should take it as a favour if you would tell me where to find your daughter.'

The old clerk sighed, and wiped away a dirty tear with the corner of a blue bird's-eye handkerchief.

'My daughter has not behaved well, Jack. Pardon the familiarity, but in happier days you were always Jack. Valaority has treated her infamously. But that isn't the worst. He has perverted her mind. She's never been a daughter to me since her marriage. I hardly see her once in a year unless I happen to run against her in the street. As to telling you where she lives, I can't take upon myself to do it. They're always on the move.'

'Have they prospered of late years?' asked the constable. 'I'm an intimate friend of Jack, sir. You may speak freely before me.'

'I don't know. Sometimes Clara seems flush of money—I can see it in her dress. She was always a slave to dress, poor foolish girl. I believe it was for the sake of fine clothes she married Valaority, who was twenty years her senior, and as ugly as sin. Sometimes she looks poor; but whether she's rich or poor I never see the colour of her money.'

There was a good deal more talk, Mr. Clews being garrulous, and glad to air his wrongs. Finally, he told John Groman of three different lodgings at which he knew his daughter to have been living within the last two years.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DARK HOUSE BY THE RIVER.

The clown and the constable spent the next six hours hunting for the Valaoritys. They went from lodging to lodging, getting their information as best they could, sometimes from landladies, sometimes at post-offices. It was hard work, and needed all the constable's professional tact, and all the clown's natural ability. Six o'clock found them in a scene so dreary that its aspect froze John Groman's heart. Could he hope that his brother, having once entered this den of sordid vice, could ever leave it alive? Burke's house, in the Tanner's Close, that one lonely dwelling at the end of a blind alley, was hardly a fitter temple for the genius of murder. It was a narrow street on the Surrey shore, between the bridges of Waterloo and Blackfriars, a street leading down to the river. On one side it was overshadowed by a huge bulk of buildings, devoted to some loathsome and unsavory trade, bone-burning, or some industry of an equally repulsive nature; on the other, it was darkened by the high wall of a neighbouring mews. There were only three dwelling-houses in the street, two at the entrance, and one at the extreme end, backing on to the river, a tall dark house, whose chief windows had been bricked up to save the window-tax.

This was the house to which Mr. Groman and his companion had been last directed, the end of their quest, for they had been told that here Mr. and Mrs. Valaority were now living.

An elderly woman, dark as a gipsy, wearing a tawdry cap and gown, and a pair of long French ear-rings, opened the door at the constable's repeated knock.

'Mr. Valaority at home?' asked Wormald, pushing his way into the passage.

Within all looked dark and dirty in the dim light of a tallow candle, guttering out its brief existence in a large brass candlestick.

'Mr. Valaority started for the Continent last night,' answered the woman, looking suspiciously at the intruders.

'You mean this morning,' said the constable. 'He

couldn't have gone last night, for a friend of mine was to sup with him after the play.'

'Your friend didn't come, then,' said the woman; 'Mr. Valaority left last night—indeed, early in the evening.'

'Do you know what part of the Continent he is going to?'

'No. He is not a man to tell his business.'

'No, I suppose not. Yet, I should have thought he would hardly have kept you in the dark. You look like a relation.'

'I am a relation.'

'Exactly. Well, I'm sorry he's gone, for I've got particular business with him. However, I daresay Mrs. Valaority will do.'

'Mrs. Valaority went with her husband.'

'What, at such short notice? That's odd.'

'I didn't say they went at short notice.'

'Oh, but they must have done so, you know, since Valaority had asked my friend to sup with him after the play.'

John Groman, who was closely watchful of the hag's face, saw that her countenance changed at each mention of the friend invited to supper.

'Do they often go abroad?' asked Wormald.

'As often as the fancy takes them.'

'A very pleasant life. But Mr. Valaority has some trade or calling, I suppose.'

'He cleans pictures.'

'And occasionally manufactures old masters, no doubt. Now, if you've no objection, I should like to take a look round your house.'

'I have a very strong objection,' said the woman; 'I couldn't think of letting you into the house in Mr. Valaority's absence.'

'I'm sorry to be intrusive, but I'm a police constable, and I came prepared with a search warrant,' said Mr. Wormald quietly. 'So the best thing you can do, old lady, is to take me and my friend round. The gentleman who was expected to supper last night is missing, and we want to make sure he isn't playing hide and seek with us here.'

The man's semi-jocose tone chilled John Groman. There was an atmosphere in the house that filled his soul with despair.

The woman scrutinized the warrant, and looked at the two men, as if weighing the possibility of effectual resistance.

'Well, if you want to search the house, you'd better do it,' she said at last; 'but Mr. Valaority will have the law of you when he comes back, depend upon it.'

'Come, take your candle, old lady, and lead the way,' said the constable coolly.

She opened the door of a parlour at the back of the house, a good-sized room with a wide window down to the ground, opening on a wooden balcony that overhung the dingy tide. The stars were shining through the uncurtained window as the men went into the room.

Wormald's eye took in everything; a table spread with the remains of a convivial meal, a large dish of oyster shells, a couple of empty champagne bottles, cigar ends flung here and there among fragments of bread, a pair of candles burned down to the sockets of the tarnished metal candlesticks, an all-pervading look of dissipation.

'You see there was a supper last night,' he said, with a peculiar look at the woman, 'and Mr. Valaority sat very late for a man on the eve of a long journey.'

Then he walked to the window, opened it, and stepped out upon the balcony, followed closely by John Groman.

The tide was out, and below them lay the slimy river mud, with the stars dimly reflected on its dark surface. The lights of the opposite shore were shining through the evening mist, but on this side all was dark. Impenetrable warehouses projected their dark bulwarks on the river. There was no token of human habitation near.

'Do you think he was murdered here?' whispered John Groman, grasping the constable's arm.

'I don't like the look of the place,' Mr. Wormald answered gravely. 'And I don't like the look of that woman.'

This inspection of the balcony did not occupy five minutes. The woman was standing waiting for them inside the room, candle in hand. They never lost sight of her.

She showed them another room on the ground floor, where Valaority pursued his calling. There was a deal table strewed with brushes and pots, and bottles of varnish, and tubes of colour. A couple of Windsor chairs and a pile of unframed canvases in a corner completed the contents of the room.

Mr. Wormald sounded the walls for hidden cupboards, opened one obvious cupboard, and with those sharp eyes of his scrutinized every inch of the room, just as he had done in the parlour where the fragments of the feast had been

left. Then he followed the woman upstairs. There were a couple of bedrooms, dirty and wretchedly furnished, on the first floor, and above that there was only emptiness. The people of the house were in the habit of letting these upper rooms unfurnished, the woman told Mr. Wormald, and had been sometime without a lodger.

'I should like to see the people of the house,' said Wormald. 'Are they in?'

The woman thought not, but after they had explored the upper part of the house the constable insisted upon descending to the basement, John Groman following at his heels.

There, in a miserable den, where the atmosphere was thick with the reek of strong tobacco and faintly odorous of gin, they found the landlady. She was cooking her supper at a scanty fire, while her husband slept on a press bed close by, half smothered under a dingy blanket and a tattered patchwork counterpane, and groaning heavily in his sleep every now and then.

The constable looked round the room. It offered little to his scrutiny: bare whitewashed walls, a few shelves garnished with a heterogeneous collection of crockery and hardware, a Dutch clock, and a heap of odd boots and shoes on a bench in a corner. The room, which appeared to be on a level with the bed of the river, was eminently suggestive of rats. Beyond it there was an oosy scullery, like a grotto, floor and walls alike covered with a slimy moisture. The constable penetrated this inner vault, candle in hand, saw nothing but cockroaches, and returned to the more congenial atmosphere of the kitchen.

'Is that your husband?'

'Yes, surr, glory be to God!'

'What's his trade?'

'Ah, thin shure, it isn't a thrade at all at all. Minding ould shoes is almost as bad as a purfession. Yer may as aisily starve at it!'

'Is he ill?'

'The rheumatiz in every blessed bone of 'um!'

'How long have the Valaoritys been lodging with you?'

'Ah, thin sure it's as near tree months as it can be without bein' the quarther.'

'Do you find them decent people?'

'As honest as the daylight.'

'When did Mr. and Mrs. Valaority leave?'

'Last night.'

'At what time?'

'Ah, sure thin, your honor, me husband and me was abed early. We didn't take notice.'

'And you heard no disturbance on the floor above last night?'

'Was it disthurbance? There's not quieter sowls breathin' the breath of heaven than Mr. and Mrs. Valority. Shure it's mild as an angel she is. A sweeter cratur never walked the Lord's earth.'

After this the constable gave a last searching glance round the kitchen and then departed, escorted to the threshold by Valaority's kinswoman.

"Don't you think it likely that—if any wrong has been done—that Irishwoman and her husband are in it?' asked Groman, when they were in the street.

'I'm sure of it,' answered Wormald.

'And you begin to think there has been foul play?' said Groman tremulously.

'I won't go so far as that; but I think your brother was in that house last night after he left you. There had been a supper—a couple of bottles of champagne: that means business. Yes, your brother has been there, and those people have got the diamonds. The rest remains for us to unravel. Should you be afraid to go to Paris with me?'

'I would go anywhere with you in the hope of finding my brother. But why Paris?'

'Because that city is a magnet which draws men and women of the Valaority stamp, when they have plunder to dispose of, or money to spend. Paris and New York are the two grand centres of crime. The criminal who would escape the felon's dock goes to New York; the happy-go-lucky thief, who only wants to enjoy himself, goes to Paris. Now, it seems to me that one of two things must have happened. Either your brother has gone off with Mrs. Valaority, after giving her husband a share of his property, and sending him to keep out of the way——'

'Impossible!'

'Then comes the darker fear. The Valaoritys have made away with your brother. Now it seems to me that in this case—God grant it may not be so!—but, at the worst, it seems to me that if you can get hold of Mrs. Valaority, who, from your account, must be a weak piece of humanity, you maywring the truth from her.'

'Yes,' said John Groman, resolutely. 'I believe that if Clara were involved in any crime against my brother, and I had her face to face with me, I could make her tell me all. She loved him passionately. That I know. Whatever good or

noble feeling she was capable of was given to him. And if she could stand by and see him murdered—if she could fall to such a depth of iniquity—I think at the sound of my voice and the sight of my face, and the memory of years that are gone, she would cast herself in the dust at my feet and confess her crime.'

'We'll try it on, at any rate,' said the constable; 'when there's a woman in the case I never despair of finding out all I want to know.'

CHAPTER V.

HIS OLD LOVE.

Two days later John Groman and his companion were in Paris, where the constable found an old friend in the French police, a man who had left Bow Street to graduate under Vidocq. This gentleman was familiar with every mesh in the web of Parisian life, and was able, in less than three hours, to favour his friend Wormald with the following information :—

The Valaoritys had been seen by the Parisian police. Valaority was an old hand, and well known to the *railles*. He had been trying to dispose of diamonds at a shop in the Palais Royal, but the shopman had refused to deal with him. It was not known at present where he was lodging, but Mr. Wormald's friend gave him a list of about twenty probable places, lodging-houses, at which a man of Valaority's type would be likely to seek accommodation.

'It is a kind of blackbird that sings always in the same key,' he said; 'one knows where to find this species.'

Two hours' hunt in Paris resulted more successfully than an afternoon's hunt in London. Before dark on the evening of their arrival in the dazzling city, the clown and the constable had stalked their game. They had found a tall, grimy-looking house near the Luxembourg, where Mr. and Mrs. Valaority were living. The porter told them that the Greek gentleman and his wife had gone out to dine at a restaurant, and to take their pleasure afterwards.

'Let us go and have a stroll on the Boulevards,' said Mr. Wormald, who had done business in Paris before; 'we may meet them there. If not, we can return late in the evening.'

Had he been happy in his mind, John Groman would have been delighted with the Boulevards. It was his first visit to Paris. He had often promised his wife to take her over for a month's holiday and a new bonnet; and he had often promised himself the pleasure of seeing what a French clown was like in his native air. He had seen the species once or twice attached to a circus, and had thought it a spurious article, while your dancing Pierrot, a poor creature in black and white, seemed to him beneath contempt.

But now he walked the glittering lamp-lit Boulevards without a thought either of business or pleasure. The crowd of faces, the dazzling shop windows, the everlasting cafés, the jingling omnibuses, passed him like objects seen in a dream. He was thinking of that lonely house by the Thames, the balcony overhanging the dark water, the mystery and sordid horror of the scene. The fact that the Valaoritys had been seen in Paris with diamonds in their possession seemed a conclusive proof of the worst. He had little hope now of ever seeing again upon earth the bright familiar face that had flashed upon him like a burst of sudden sunshine on the night of his birthday.

They walked the busy Boulevard to a point at which they seemed to reach the uttermost limit of civilization, and saw no trace of the Valaoritys, though the constable made John Groman look in every café on their way. Near the Porte Saint Martin they went into an unpretentious restaurant and dined, simply and briefly, neither being in the humour for the pleasures of the table.

'I wonder we haven't passed them,' said Wormald; 'everybody comes to the Boulevards. If it were finer weather I should look for them in the Champs Elysées, but it's too cold and bleak for walking under trees to-night.'

They crossed the road, and made their way back on the opposite side to that by which they had ascended the Boulevard.

'What ought I to do if I see them?' asked Groman.

'Get hold of her. I'll settle with him.'

'You can't arrest him?'

'No, worse luck. He's safe here for the moment.'

John Groman looked at all the faces that passed him, but none recalled the fair young face he remembered fifteen years ago, when Clara Clews was in the bloom of her girlish beauty, a face of extreme delicacy, features finely chiselled as a Roman cameo, eyes of lustrous grey, darkened by long black lashes, a complexion like the carnation bloom on a peach. He looked and looked till his eyes ached, but in vain.

Suddenly the constable pulled him sharply by the arm at the door of a café, a gaudy, glittering place, all lamps, looking-glass, and gilding.

'I shouldn't be surprised if that was your man,' he said, directing Groman's attention to a man and woman sitting at a table near the entrance, with a pair of tall glasses and a champagne bottle before them.

The man was old and ugly, with a mahogany skin and black eyes—sharp, small, and restless as a caged rat's. If the woman at the house by the river had been a chimney ornament, this man would have made the pair. He bore the same relation to her that the cobbler in old Bristol delf does to his crockery wife.

The woman, sitting opposite him, was of a different type. Features finely chiselled as those in the face John Groman remembered of old; eyes as large and lustrous, but with what an altered radiance; complexion changed from peach-bloom to the dull, sickly hue of old ivory—faded beauty, sad relic of a life ill spent.

'Yes,' whispered Groman, 'that's Clara.'

While he was speaking Valaority rose, said something to his wife while he lighted his cigar, and came out of the café, leaving her sitting at the table, with the half-empty bottle before her. Groman and the constable moved away from the door, and the Greek passed without noticing them.

'Now's your chance,' said Wormald. 'I don't suppose he'll be long away. You've no time to lose.'

Groman seated himself in Valaority's empty chair.

'Clara,' he said, in a low voice, leaning across the table to speak to her, 'what have you done with my brother?'

She had taken the champagne bottle in her hand to refill her glass. At the sound of John Groman's voice she set it down hastily, striking the glass against the marble.

'My God!' she cried, 'how like your voice is——"

'Like my brother's? That isn't strange. There never were brothers nearer and dearer than Edward and I. But for you I should have had him for my companion and friend all my life. You brought dishonour and misery upon my good, honest father and mother. You blighted my brother's youth, and robbed him of his good name. And when he came back to me after fifteen years, you—his evil genius—lured him to your wicked den to plunder and murder him.'

'Murder!' she cried. 'No, no, no—not murder. It was not my doing. None of it was my doing. I stood up for him—I tried; but you don't know what Valaority is—a devil—a devil let loose to prey upon men. He is not made of the same sort of stuff as men like you—he is not flesh and blood to suffer and feel and be sorry, as I suffer and am sorry, though I have been so wicked. My life has been all wickedness since I married him. I linked myself to incarnate sin. I am not his wife, but his slave. When I thwart him—see, this is what he does.'

All this had been spoken hurriedly, in a low, suppressed

voice. With her last words she pushed back the lace from her wrist and showed John Groman two livid bruises on the fair skin—bruises that looked like the print of a man's savage hand. Then she took up the bottle again and filled her glass, with a hand that shook like a leaf, and drank the wine eagerly to the last drop.

The constable had brought a chair to the table and seated himself by Groman's side. He was not inclined to trust altogether to his client's discretion.

'Come,' he said, in a soothing tone, as if he had been speaking to a child. 'Come, Mrs. Valaority, tell us all about it. Your husband will be back directly, and then it will be too late. Make a clean breast of it, and we'll take care of you. You've got the diamonds. We know all about that.'

'He has,' said Mrs. Valaority, vindictively, filling her glass again. 'I never get anything but fine clothes and hard usage.'

'What have you done with Edward Groman? Come, you were too fond of him in days gone by to stand by and see him murdered.'

'Murdered!' cried Clara, with her eyes flashing. 'If Valaority had laid a finger upon him I would have torn his eyes out. I would have fought for him as a tigress would for her whelps, if his life had been in danger, weak and small and crooked as I am. Fond of him in days gone by,' she echoed, with a hysterical laugh, 'when have I ever ceased to be fond of him? I am fonder of him now than anything between heaven and earth.'

'And yet you lured him to that vile den of yours,' said John Groman. 'You let your husband——'

'I thought my husband wanted only to borrow a few pounds from him. That was what he told me. Edward had come home flush of money. He called at a tavern kept by old friends of ours—people who were always kind to me—a place were I was always welcome. Edward came in while I was sitting in the bar. It was like seeing a ghost, and he was so pleased to see me, poor fellow, in spite of all the trouble I had brought upon him; and he told me his adventures and how he had made his fortune; and while he was talking Valaority came in, and pretended not to be angry at seeing us together, and wormed everything out of Edward. He told us that he was going to drop into the theatre in the evening to surprise you on your birthday. Valaority asked him to come to supper with us afterwards, but he said it was impossible, he must stick to dear old Jack, and then——

hush,' she whispered with a look of awful fear, 'here comes my husband.'

Wormald pulled John Groman away from the table.

'I know all about it,' he said. 'There's no use in talking to the Greek.'

The man came scowling up to the table, frowned at the two men, and frowned still more heavily at his wife.

'What have those two fellows been saying to you,' he asked.

'They are strangers in Paris, and were asking me about the sights. You might as well have taken me to a theatre to-night, Stephen. I should like to see that play the people are all talking about, "Thirty years in a Gambler's Life."'

'You'll see plays enough, if you behave yourself,' he answered roughly; and if you don't, you'll be the heroine of a tragedy on your own account.'

'What do you mean by bringing me away?' asked Groman angrily, when they were on the Boulevard. 'Do you think I'm afraid to face Valaority?'

'What's the good of a row? or of getting that poor little woman half murdered? I've no power to arrest him here. You want to find your brother, don't you? Yes, of course. Well, I've found him.'

'What do you mean?'

'We've been the blindest moles—we've been the most confounded asses—there isn't language strong enough to say what we've been,' cried Wormald, savagely. 'To get into that house, and to see him lying there, and not to understand, after thirty years' experience; and to come across the Channel, and leave him there at the mercy of those two hags.'

'For pity's sake, man, don't trifle with me,' exclaimed John Groman, in a paroxysm of excitement. 'What do you mean?'

'Why, that the man lying in the kitchen, smothered under a blanket, groaning in his sleep—the man that Irish hag called her husband—was your brother—hocussed, robbed, and left in that den in the care of those two beldames.'

'Great heaven! And we left him there to be murdered.'

'Hardly. They've got what they wanted. They'd hardly use foul play afterwards, unless he rode rusty, and they did it in self-defence. Yes, it's clear as daylight. Valaority drugged him, robbed him, and left him in charge of these women. The stupefaction of the dose, whatever it was—a pinch of powdered tobacco, perhaps, in a tumbler of stout—would keep him quiet for a day or two, and by that time the thief would have got safe off with his plunder.'

'God grant you're right,' cried Groman.

'I'm so convinced about it, that although I've led you on a wild goose chase over here, I'm not afraid to ask you to go back to London with me, and to trust to me to find your brother.'

James Wormald was right. They went back to London, and straight to the house by the river. They had some difficulty in getting in. The Greek hag had vanished, but the Irish woman was still at her post by the kitchen fire, cooking sausages, and the man was still lying on the bed covered with a blanket; but this time he was not to be kept quiet by any management of his guardian's. He flung back the bed coverings, and was talking wildly as Groman and his companion entered the kitchen.

It was Edward Groman, delirious, and in a high fever. The drug employed in the hocussing process had been something stronger than a pinch of tobacco, and, acting upon a brain in a state of hyper-excitement, had been well nigh fatal. Another twenty-four hours in that underground kitchen would have finished him. That was the verdict of the doctor who assisted in removing John Groman's brother to Rose Cottage, Pentonville.

Here, watched and nursed with unspeakable tenderness by Jack and the little woman, Edward Groman slowly recovered from the horror of those five days and nights in the underground den, during which he had had a dim consciousness of his position and surroundings, and a sense of helplessness more awful than the fear of death. He had lain there like a paralysed creature, and had seen the hag brooding over her grimy hearth, and had not known if she were real, or the hideous vision of his distracted brain.

Neither the Valaoritys nor the stolen diamonds were ever heard of any more, but Edward Groman bore his loss with philosophical equanimity.

'The seed that a man sows in his youth must be reaped in his age, Jack,' he said. 'I have had my lesson. It's a good thing though, old fellow, that all my eggs were not in the same basket. I bought a block of land in New York with some of my money before I shipped myself for Holland and nobody can steal that. So, when you and the little woman are tired of me, you can send me back to America.'

'That will never be!' cried Jack and the little woman, in a chorus of two.

DR. CARRICK.

CHAPTER I.

THE DOCTOR.

Dr. Carrick was a man of genius whose life had been a failure. On his five-and-fortieth birthday he looked back, with a gloomy gaze, upon a career that had not been brightened by one solitary success. Most men have their intervals of good luck; but in the desert of this man's life there had been no green spot. People spoke well of him, lauded him for his high principles and rugged honesty; but they began to call him poor Carrick. That was bitter.

He had practised as a physician in many places. First in a quiet country town, where he kept his gig, and pinched himself in order to feed his horse, and where he simulated success by the respectability of his appearance and surroundings. But the cost of his house and servants, his horse and gig, sleek broadcloth and fine linen, crushed him. He succumbed under the severe proprieties of provincial life, and migrated to London, thinking to find there a wider field for his abilities.

He found the field wide enough, so wide indeed that nobody seemed aware of his existence. If he had been a clever quack who made bread pills he might have advertised his way to fortune; but he was only a man who had adopted a difficult profession from sheer love of science, and who asked for nothing better than to be able to live by his labour, and to go on extending his experience and adding to his knowledge.

Dr. Carrick tried London, from the western suburbs to the heights of Pentonville, from Bloomsbury to Blackfriars,

from Lambeth to Bow, and he left it, after fifteen weary years, as poor a man as when he entered that stony wilderness, save for a legacy of three hundred and forty pounds from an octogenarian great aunt, whose very existence he had forgotten till this godsend dropped into his lap.

His professional labours in the metropolis had given him just a bare livelihood. He was a man of exceptional temperance and self-denial, and could live upon a pittance which, for a less Spartan mind, would have meant starvation. He left London without a debt, and with a decent coat on his back; and perhaps the monster city, beneath whose feet many a pearl is flung to be trampled into the mire, has seldom cast out of its bosom, unknown and unvalued, a cleverer man than Theodore Carrick.

That legacy—the first boon which fortune had ever bestowed upon him—was a turning-point in Dr. Carrick's life. It can hardly be said to have made him richer, for, with the three hundred and forty pounds, his great aunt had left him something else—a distant cousin of two-and-twenty, a gentle, patient, willing girl, with a pale placid face, dark hazel eyes, and dark brown hair that had a tinge of ruddy gold in the sunshine. This fourth or fifth cousin of the doctor's was one of those waifs, which the sea of life is always throwing up on the bleak shores of adversity. No shipwrecked princess in sweet Shakespearian story, was ever more helpless and alone than Hester Rushton at the beginning of life. Old Mrs. Hedger, hearing of the untimely end of the girl's parents, had taken her at the age of twelve as companion, *protégée*, drudge, and victim. As a child, Hester had endured the old lady's tempers with unvarying patience; as a girl she had waited upon her, and nursed her with unfailing care. But she never learned to flatter or to fawn, so Mrs. Hedger left her old servant Betty a thousand pounds, and Hester only a hundred.

When Dr. Carrick went down to the little Hertfordshire village to attend his aunt's funeral, in the character of a grateful legatee he found Hester Rushton among the other goods and chattels in the house of death, and with very little more idea as to her future destiny than the chairs and tables, which were to be sold by the auctioneer on the following Monday.

'And what are you going to do, Miss Rushton?' asked Dr. Carrick, when the funeral was over.

'I don't know,' said Hester simply.

And then the tears came into her eyes at the thought of her loneliness. The old lady had never been particularly

kind to her, but she had given her lodging, and food, and raiment; and life, though joyless, had been sheltered from the bleak winds of misfortune.

'I suppose I shall go and live—somewhere,' said Hester vaguely. 'I can get a room in the village for four shillings a week, and perhaps I might get some children to teach—very little children, who would not want to learn much.'

'I think you had much better come and live with me,' said Dr. Carrick. 'I am going to buy a country practice, somewhere in the West of England, where living is cheap; you can come and keep house for me.'

Hester accepted the offer as frankly as it was made.

'Do you really think I could be useful to you?' she asked. 'I used to look after the house, and indeed do a good deal of the house-work for aunt Hedger, but, I shouldn't like to be a burden to you,' concluded Hester, very seriously.

She was a conscientious little thing, and had never had a selfish thought in her life.

The idea that it might not be strictly correct, or in accordance with the laws of society, that a young lady of two-and-twenty should keep house for a gentleman of five-and-forty, never entered her mind. Her only anxiety was not to impose upon her cousin Carrick's goodness.

'You will not be a burden to me,' answered Dr. Carrick. 'Poor as I am, I have always been cheated by my servants. Yes, even when I have been so low in the world as to have nobody but a charwoman, that charwoman has stolen my coals, and taken toll of my tea and sugar. You will save me more than you will cost me.'

So it came to pass that Dr. Carrick gave a hundred and fifty pounds for a practice in a Cornish village, within half-a-dozen miles of Penzance, and set up housekeeping in a roomy old house, on a hill above the broad Atlantic; a house whose windows looked down upon a wild rockbound shore, where the wide-winged cormorants perched upon the craggy pinnacles of serpentine, and where the sea in sunny weather wore the changeful colours of a dolphin's back.

CHAPTER II.

HIS PATIENT.

For the first three years, Dr. Carrick's life at the village of St. Hildred was, like all that had gone before it, a hard struggle for the bare necessities of existence. Provisions were cheap at St. Hilda, and it was the fashion to live simply, or else in those first years the doctor could hardly have lived at all. He soon won for himself a reputation for skill in his profession, and people believed in that grave, earnest manner of his, the dark, deep-set eyes, pale, passionless face, and high, bald brow. He was more respected than liked by the lower orders, while he was too grave and wise for the fox-hunting squires and their homely wives; but, happily, all agreed in believing him clever, so that by the end of those probationary years, he had acquired a practice which just enabled him to maintain his small household decently, keep his horse, and indulge himself with a new suit of clothes once a year.

This was not much to have gained at the end of eight-and-twenty years of toil and study, and any one who looked in the doctor's face, could see there the stamp of a disappointed life. His spirits had sunk into a settled melancholy, from which he rarely took the trouble to rouse himself. In his professional work his manner was quick, decisive, trenchant; at home he gave himself up to thought and study.

Hester—or Hettie as she was more familiarly called—had proved a domestic treasure. She kept the big, rambling old house as neat as a new pin, with only the aid of a ruddy-cheeked buxom Cornish girl, whose wages were five pounds a year. She had brightened up the old furniture—left by the doctor's predecessor, and bought cheap by the doctor—in such a marvellous way, that the clumsy old chairs and tables looked almost handsome. The bedrooms, with their low ceilings, wide fire-places, huge four-post bedsteads, and dark damask draperies, had a gloom which even her art could not dispel; and there were abiding shadows on the darksome old staircase, and in the long narrow corridors, that suggested ghostly visitors. Indeed, it was because the house had long enjoyed the reputation of being haunted, that the doctor had taken it. The Cornish mind was averse from

ghosts, so the rent of St. Hildred House was ridiculously small.

One bleak March evening, Dr. Carrick was summoned to a patient at a distance. The night was wild and rough for a long ride upon a lonely road, and the doctor was tired after his day's work; but the words Tregonnell Manor, pronounced by the rosy-faced maid-of-all-work, acted like a charm. He started up from his comfortable arm-chair, flung his book aside, and went out into the dimly-lighted hall. The door was open, and a man on horseback was waiting in front of it.

'Has Mr. Tregonnell came back to the manor?' asked the doctor.

'Yes, sir. Master came home this morning. He's not been well for some time—a nasty low fever hanging about him; but he kept out with his yacht as long as he could, coasting about Spain and the south of France. Yesterday we put in at Plymouth, and came home early this morning by the night coach. He's looking right down bad, and he sent me to ask you to ride over.'

'I'll come directly. Is there a medicine chest at Tregonnell?'

'There be a chest, I know; but I can't say as there's anything in it.'

'I'd better bring what I'm likely to want. I'll go and saddle my horse.'

Throughout his residence at St. Hildred, the doctor had groomed his horse. There was no horse better groomed or better fed in the neighbourhood.

Tregonnell Manor was the most important place between the Land's End and the Lizard; a good old house of the Elizabethan period, with a fine estate attached to it. The Tregonnells, once a large family, had dwindled down to a single descendant, a bachelor of three-and-thirty, who was rumoured to have lived a wild life in London and other great cities, to have made shipwreck of a fine constitution, and to be not altogether right in his mind. His appearances at Tregonnell Manor were fitful and unexpected. He never stayed there long, and he never seemed to know what to do with his life when he was there. He avoided all society, and his only pleasure appeared to be in yachting. He was an excellent sailor, commanded his own yacht, and went everywhere, from the Start Point to the Black Sea.

Dr. Carrick had heard a great deal about this Squire Tregonnell—the last of the good old Tregonnell race—men who had worn sword and gown, and had played their part in

every great struggle, from the Wars of the Roses to the Battle of the Boyne. He knew that Eustace Tregonnell was one of the richest men in this part of the country. A valuable patient for a struggling physician, assuredly.

The stable clock at Tregonnell Manor was striking ten as the doctor and the groom rode in at the open gate, between tall stone pillars crowned with the Tregonnell escutcheon. By the half light of a waning moon, drifting in a sea of clouds, the grounds of the manor-house looked gloomy and unbeautiful, the house itself sombre and uninviting. Within, all had the same air of abiding gloom. The dark oak pannelling and old pictures, the rusty armour, the low ceilings, and deep-set doors were unbrightened by any of the signs of occupation or family life. Tregonnell Manor looked what it was, the house of a man who had never found, or hoped to find, happiness in his home. An old servant opened a door and ushered the doctor into a large room, lined with books. Mr. Tregonnell sat by the wide hearth, where the neglected logs were dropping into grey ashes, a small table with a reading-lamp by his side. This lamp was the only light in the room. It illuminated the table and a narrow circle round it, and left all else in deep shadow.

'Good evening, doctor,' said Mr. Tregonnell, pleasantly enough, shutting his book, and motioning the doctor to a chair on the opposite side of the hearth.

The face which he turned to Dr. Carrick was a remarkable, and an interesting one. Ruins are always interesting; and this face was the ruin of one of the handsomest faces Dr. Carrick had ever seen. A face pale as marble, eyes of that dark grey which looks black, a broad brow, whose whiteness was made more striking by the blackness of the thick, short hair that framed it, features well and firmly carved, and about all an expression of intense melancholy—that utter weariness of life, which is more difficult to cure than any other form of depression. Premature lines marked the broad brow, the cheeks were hollow, the eyes wan and haggard. If this man was indeed the last and sole representative of the Tregonnell race, that race seemed in sore danger of extinction.

Dr. Carrick felt his new patient's pulse, and looked at him thoughtfully for a minute or so, in the vivid light of the reading-lamp.

He made none of the stereotyped inquiries.

'What is the matter with you?' he asked bluntly. 'You know much better than I can tell you.'

'A restlessness that impels me to be continually shifting the scene of my life; an indescribable disgust at everything, and a hatred of all places; a feeling that I have lived too long, and yet that I don't quite want to die.'

'You have made a mistake common to young men who have fine constitutions and fine fortunes. You have fancied both inexhaustible.'

'I have been extravagant, but I have hardly spent my income,' answered Mr. Tregonnell, frankly, 'but I daresay I have used my constitution rather badly. I had a disappointment early in life—I daresay you have heard the story. I wanted to marry a woman whom my father was pleased to call my inferior, though she was as much my superior then in her stainless womanhood, as she is now as a sinless soul in paradise. He gave me a yacht, for which I had been longing, and sent me abroad in the hope that I should cure myself of my fancy. I was happy enough in the bustle and variety of my life, thinking that things would work round in time, and that I should come home and find my darling true to me, and my father more indulgent. I wrote to her from every port, and in every letter told her the same story. We had only to be true to each other, and to wait for happier days. I should wait, if need were, till my hair grew grey. I was away a year, and my life during all that time was such a wandering one, that it was no surprise to me to find my letters unanswered. When I came back, I found a grave, and discovered later, that my sweet girl had been sent to drudge as an articled pupil in a school at Exeter. Not one of my letters had been given to her. They would only have unsettled her, her wicked old hag of a grandmother told me. I knew afterwards that my father had bought her people over to his interests. She had no mother. Her father was a weak-minded drunkard; her grandmother a greedy, time-serving old harridan. Between them they killed her, and broke my heart. That was the beginning of my wild career, Dr. Carrick. Not a very cheerful one, was it?'

'A common story, I fear.'

'Yes; wrecked and ruined lives are common enough, I daresay. They fill the midnight haunts in the Haymarket, and keeping gambling-houses going, and swell the excise. I went to London after my father's death, and from London to Paris, and from Paris to Vienna. There is very little wildness or wickedness in those three cities, that I could not enlighten you about. A man cannot touch pitch without defilement. I didn't steep myself to the lips in pitch, or

wallow in it, and enjoy it as some men do; but I touched it, and the taint cleaves to me. There is nothing in this world that men call pleasure which has the faintest charm for me. My nights are restless, and troubled with feverish dreams. And sometimes—sometimes—I start up with a sudden thrill of horror going through me like an arrow, and feel as if the hair of my head were lifted up, like Job's, at a vision of hideous fear.'

'What is it you fear?'

'Madness,' answered Eustace Tregonnell, in a half whisper. 'It has appeared more than once in my family. My grandfather died mad. Sometimes I fancy that I can feel it coming. It has seemed near at hand, even. I have looked in the glass, started at my haggard face, hardly recognizing myself, and have cried out involuntarily, "That is the face of a madman."'

'A not unnatural result of sleepless and troubled nights,' answered the doctor, quietly. 'Do you know that a week's insomnia—one little week absolutely without sleep—has been known to result in temporary lunacy? That was an extreme case, of course; but the man who can't sleep comfortably, is always in a bad way. You must have refreshing sleep, Mr. Tregonnell, or your fears may be realized.'

'Where are the drugs that will give it me? I have tried them all. The sole effect of opiates is to send me into a fever, and to make me twice as wakeful as I am without them.'

'I should not recommend opiates in your case.'

'What would you recommend then?'

'Mesmerism.'

Mr. Tregonnell smiled, a smile at once contemptuous and impatient.

'I sent for a physician, whose sagacity I have heard highly lauded. I did not expect to meet——"

"A quack," said Dr. Carrick. 'Yes, I know that mesmerism ranks with table-turning and other juggleries. A striking proof of the ignorance of the popular mind upon all scientific questions outside the narrow range of old-established orthodoxy.'

And then Dr. Carrick went on to discourse eloquently upon mesmerism as a curative agent. He told Mr. Tregonnell about Dr. Esdaile's experiments in the native hospital in Calcutta; he argued warmly in favour of an influence which was evidently with him a favourite subject of study.

'Have you tried this wonderful agent upon any of your Cornish patients?' asked Mr. Tregonnell.

'I am not such a fool. A century ago they would have punished mesmerism under the head of witchcraft: to-day they would scout it as quackery. I talk freely to you, because I take you for a reasonable and enlightened being.'

'Do you think I am a subject for mesmerism?'

'I know you are, and an excellent one.'

'Mesmerise me, then,' said Mr. Tregonnell, quietly, throwing himself back in his chair, and fixing his dark, haggard eyes upon the doctor.

'In this house? Impossible! I should throw you into a sleep which would last for hours; a sleep of deepest unconsciousness, from which the loudest noises would not awaken you; a sleep in which you would be even insensible to pain. Your servants would take alarm. My coming and going might seem strange; and, in short, if I am to cure you by means of mesmerism, as I know I can—yes, tame that wild fever of your blood, reduce that unhealthy restlessness to placid repose, banish fears which are not wholly groundless; in a word, give you that which ancient philosophy counted as the highest good, a sane mind in a sound body; if I am to do all this, Mr. Tregonnell, I must have the case in my own hands. I must have you under my care by day and night. My house is large and commodious. You must come and live with me.'

'Humph!' muttered Mr. Tregonnell. 'Is not that rather like going into a private lunatic asylum?'

'My house is not registered as an asylum, and I never had a lunatic in my care. No, Mr. Tregonnell; you will be farther from lunacy under my roof than you are here, eating your heart out by this dismal fireside.'

'Yes, it is dismal; the sort of house that ought to be occupied by a large family. Well, I am half inclined to go to you. I shall be a free agent in your house, I conclude; able to roam about as I like by day, provided I keep decent hours at night. You will put no restraint upon my movements?'

'None.'

'Can you find room for my horse and for my servant?'

'For both.'

'Then I will come. Mind, I do not promise to stay with you for any given time. I must be free as the wind. If you can give me sound and peaceful sleep with your mesmeric passes, I shall be grateful to you—and mesmerism. But can you not give me a taste of your quality at once, here?'

'No; I am expected home. If I mesmerised you to-night, I should want to stay with you and see the result of my experiment. Come to me for a week. If by the end of that time your spirits are not tranquillized, and your general health is not improved, call me a charlatan, and have done with me.'

'I am very much inclined to believe in you,' said Mr. Tregonnell, gazing steadily at the doctor. 'You look as if you were in earnest.'

'I have been in earnest all my life,' answered Dr. Carrick. And then inwardly he added: 'But I never had an object worth being in earnest about until to-night.'

CHAPTER III.

HESTER FINDS A FRIEND.

The best rooms in St. Hildred House were swept and garnished for Squire Tregonnell. Hester Rushton, who had a natural womanly love of household duties, was in her element while she bustled about, polishing, dusting, and arranging things for the reception of an honoured inmate. She caught herself singing at her work that busy morning, with a sense of pleasant expectation that was new and sweet. It was a relief to think of a stranger coming to live in that big empty house. Dr. Carrick was of so reserved a temper, that Hester seemed no more intimate with him now, after three years' domestic companionship, than on the day of her aunt's funeral. She could complain of no unkindness. He never spoke harshly to her, even when most troubled in mind. He thanked her courteously for all her attentions; praised her economies and clever management of his house; but he gave her none of his confidence. She felt that she knew no more of his heart and mind than if he had been a man of stone.

About his new patient, Dr. Carrick had told his cousin only that he was a man of wealth and position; that he was to have the best rooms in the house; and that his valet was to be made comfortable in the servants' offices. Hester was more frightened at the idea of the valet than at the grandeur of the master.

Happily, Mr. Tregonnell's body-servant was not a pampered cockney, corrupted by the luxurious idleness of chambers in the Albany, but a clever, handy fellow, used to roughing it on board his master's yacht, and with a genius for every art that can make the wheels of daily life work smoothly. He was a first-rate cook, and an accomplished butler; and took upon himself all those delicate labours which were beyond the power of Dr. Carrick's maid-of-all-work.

Mr. Tregonnell finished his first week at St. Hildred House, and looked considerably better and brighter at the end of it. He spent his mornings in roaming about the cliffs, or riding in the Cornish lanes; his afternoons in reading; his evenings in the society of Dr. Carrick and Miss

Rushton. He was a man who had seen men and cities, and read much. His conversation, therefore, was full of interest; and Hester, to whom all intellectual conversation was new, listened with unvarying delight. It was to be observed, however, that he never talked of himself.

The week ended, and Mr. Tregonnell had no wish to return to the manor. He now firmly believed in the power of mesmerism. Nightly, in the silence of his bedchamber, the doctor exercised his potent, but seeming simple art. A steady pressure of his hands upon the shoulders of the patient, a series of mystic passes before the dreamy eyes, and the charm worked. First a new sense of warmth, comfort, and lightness stole through the frame; then the heavy eyelids drooped involuntarily, the will lost its waking power; then came deep, prolonged, and restful sleep, bringing healing and regeneration to mind and body.

This treatment was known to none save the patient and the physician. David Skelter, the valet, had never been in very close attendance upon his master, who was a man of independent habits. His bedroom was on an upper floor, remote from Mr. Tregonnell's apartment, and the valet saw nothing of his master after he had arranged his room for the night.

Hester Rushton's ideas as to the treatment of the patient were of the vaguest. Dr. Carrick had told her only that Mr. Tregonnell required rest and retirement.

So the days went on, and Hester's life took a new colour from the presence of a man of intellect and refinement, who treated her as a being of equal intelligence, and opened his mind to her freely on all subjects that were not personal. Of his opinions she knew much, of himself very little.

Spring advanced. The blusterous March winds softened into the gentle breezes of April. St. Hildred House had a good old-fashioned garden—a garden where departed generations had planted homely flowers, which blossomed year after year, unaided by the gardener's art. Everything about the place had been sorely neglected till Hester came, but this garden was her chief delight. Her household duties occupied her all the morning, but she spent every fine afternoon in the garden—her bright young head bared to the spring breeze, her clever little hands encased in thick gardening-gloves—digging, transplanting, weeding, clipping, pruning, with skill that would have done credit to a professed gardener. Labour was cheap at St. Hildred, and for sixpence a day she could get a strong lad to mow the grass and roll the gravel-walks once a week or so; an extravagance which the doctor hardly approved.

Mr. Tregonnell's sitting-room looked into the garden. One warm afternoon towards the close of April, he threw aside his book, and went downstairs to join Hester, who was budding a rose on the lawn.

'How fond you seem to be of this garden of yours, Miss Rushton,' he said at her elbow.

His footfall had been noiseless on the thick, soft grass, and his speech startled her. The cheek—turned a little from him, but not so far but that he could see its change of colour—flushed crimson, and the scissors shook in her hand.

'How you startled me!' she exclaimed. 'You don't know what a critical business budding is.'

'It looks rather like a surgical operation. Did Dr. Carrick teach you?'

'Dr. Carrick!' laughed Hester. 'I don't think he knows a rose from a dandelion, except when he uses them in medicine. No; it was a dear, deaf old gardener in Hertfordshire who taught me, years and years ago.'

'Years and years ago,' echoed Mr. Tregonnell. 'What an eternity of time you seem to express by that phrase. Pray how many centuries old may you be, Miss Rushton?'

'In actual years I believe I am twenty-five,' answered Hester, smiling; 'but I feel dreadfully old. I suppose it is because I have known a great deal of sorrow. I don't mean to complain. Indeed, I should be very wicked if I did; for my aunt Hedger and my cousin Carrick have both been very good to me; but it is hard to lose those one fondly loves in the morning of life.'

'It is,' assented Mr. Tregonnell earnestly. 'I have known that loss, Miss Rushton, and it has made me what you see—a man without aim or purpose in life—a mere shuttle-cock to drift about in a yacht, buffeted by the winds and waves, and caring very little what port I put into, or whether I go down some stormy night in mid-ocean, unlamented and unknown. And you, too, have drawn a mournful lot out of the urn, have you, little one?'

'I lost my father and mother when I was fourteen. They both died in the same week. Dear, dear papa was a curate in a Bedfordshire village. A fever broke out, and he took it, and then mamma. It was all like a dreadful dream. In a week they were gone, and I was alone with two coffins. Then aunt Hedger sent for me, and I lived with her. She was old and ailing when I went to her. Her life seemed like one long illness, and then the end came, and I was alone again. I haven't the least idea what would have become of me if

cousin Carrick had not asked me to come and take care of his house.

'You are very much attached to Dr. Carrick, I suppose?' said Mr. Tregonnell, looking at her searchingly.

He was wondering whether any hidden evil lurked beneath this outward simplicity; whether the relations between the doctor and his cousin were pure and free from guile.

'He has been very good to me,' answered Hester, innocently.

'And you like him very much no doubt?'

'I like him as much as he will let me. He is my benefactor. I should be base and ungrateful if I did not honour him. I do honour him for his kindness to me, and for his patience and fortitude, and skill in his profession. I see how much good he does. But he is as much a stranger to me now as when first I crossed the threshold of his house. It is his nature to live alone.'

This speech made Mr. Tregonnell thoughtful. He remembered a line of Schiller's:

'Fear all things in which there is an unknown depth.'

Yet what had he to fear from Dr. Carrick? All the doctor could possibly desire from him was liberal payment for service rendered, and to have his praises sounded in the neighbourhood by a grateful patient. Mr. Tregonnell had already pressed a cheque for a hundred pounds upon the doctor's acceptance, and had found it difficult to persuade him to receive so large a fee. There was to all appearance no desire to take advantage of his natural recklessness.

Henceforward it became quite a usual thing for Mr. Tregonnell to loiter in the garden while Hester worked with her pruning-scissors or trowel. He even volunteered his assistance, but Hester laughed at his offer, and declined such clumsy help. They became very confidential during those sunny afternoons; Hester telling the doctor's patient all about her happy childhood, and sad girlhood, freely confessing her want of education, and her ardent desire to learn. Mr. Tregonnell rode over to the manor one morning to select a heap of volumes for her instruction, and ordered them to be sent to St. Hildred House the same day. He took as much pains to choose books that would at once arouse her interest, as if he had been a father catering for a favourite child.

Sometimes, when the fair May afternoons were especially tempting, he insisted upon Hester's going down to the beach

with him; and they idled together upon the rugged strand, picking up masses of many coloured sea-weed, watching the black cormorants perching on the rocky pinnacles, and listening to the great strong voice of the sea. It was altogether a new life for simple Hester Rushton, but the firm, fresh young mind was in no wise injured by the association. The clever little housekeeper performed her daily tasks just as diligently as of old. The eager young student, to whom all the world of intellect was new, only applied herself to her books when her domestic duties were done.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. TREGONNELL MAKES HIS WILL.

While the acquaintance between Mr. Tregonnell and Hester Rushton thus ripened gradually into a very close friendship, Dr. Carrick was too busily occupied by his daily round of professional work to be aware of the change. He was away from home all day. When he saw his cousin and his patient in the evening, he perceived no more than that they got on very well together. This was as it should be. He wished his patient to be comfortable in his house. Mr. Tregonnell had now been with him three months, and had pressed a second cheque for a hundred pounds upon his acceptance. This was very well, and Dr. Carrick felt that if it could go on for ever his fortune would be made. But how could he hope that the thing would last? Eustace Tregonnell's fitful temper was proverbial. Some morning he would feel the old longing for the wide salt sea, and be off and away in his yacht, leaving the doctor as desolate as Dido. Dr. Carrick's only wonder was that his patient had stayed so long. It never entered into his mind that Hester Rushton's hazel eyes and gentle child-like ways could have any influence upon Mr. Tregonnell. Even the valet noticed the change which his new mode of life had wrought in his master. He talked of it in the village, and lauded Dr. Carrick's skill.

'He's the first doctor that ever did Mr. Tregonnell any good,' he said, leaning over the counter of the chief shopkeeper in St. Hildred—grocer, chemist, stationer, and postmaster—for a comfortable gossip. 'I never saw anybody so tamed down and quieted as master. He used to be all fits and starts, and as restless as if life was a burden to him. Now he seems to find pleasure in the simplest things.'

'Ah,' said the shopkeeper, 'he's been a wild one, I reckon. The Tregonnells always were wild. It's in the blood. But he hasn't been taking any more chloroform, I hope. That's a dangerous habit.'

'What do you mean?' asked David.

'Why, he's been in the habit of taking chloroform for

pains in his head. You must know that, surely. Dr. Carrick warned me not to sell him any, if he should come here for it.'

'I don't know anything about his taking chloroform,' said David. 'I know he's taken all sorts of things on board his yacht, to make him sleep; but I never heard of his taking chloroform in particular. He's got a little bottle in his medicine chest, but I don't believe he's ever taken the stopper out.

'Ah,' said the village trader, 'that's all you know about it. Dr. Carrick warned me against letting him have chloroform, and there was that in the doctor's manner which made me think it was a serious matter.'

David Skelter ruminated upon this disclosure of the shopman's. His sturdy English self-respect was offended at the idea of Dr. Carrick's interference with his master's liberty. That any man should go behind Mr. Tregonnell's back, and warn a shopkeeper against treating him as a reasonable being, roused the faithful David's indignation. It was treating the master of Tregonnell Manor like a lunatic.

That evening, after he had arranged his master's room for the night, David looked at the medicine-chest, which had been brought from the manor with Mr. Tregonnell's effects, and stood on the dressing-table, unlocked.

There was the little bottle of chloroform, three parts full. David remembered his master sending him to get it at a chemist's in Genoa, three years ago, when he was suffering from spasmodic pains in the head. The bottle was carefully stoppered.

'I don't believe master has ever opened it since we left Genoa,' David said to himself.

A few days after this Mr. Tregonnell began to talk of his yacht, ominously for Dr. Carrick. It was just the weather for a cruise, neither too cold nor too hot.

'I shan't go far afield,' said Mr. Tregonnell, 'but I feel that a breath of the sea would do me good. I shall go and cruise about the Scilly Isles, for a week or so, or perhaps sail as far as Madeira, and then come back and settle down again.'

David, who was of a roving temper, was delighted at the idea of getting to sea again. His master sent him to Falmouth next day, to buy certain things that were wanted on board the *Water Fay*.

Mr. Tregonnell went to his room a little earlier than usual upon the evening after David's departure. He had ridden a

long way that day, and his horse had been restive and troublesome. He had come home late in the afternoon, much fatigued.

'Oh, by-the-way, Hester,' said Dr. Carrick, after his cousin had wished him good-night, 'I must ask you not to go to bed just yet, and you can tell Betsy to wait up for an hour or so. I shall want you both in Mr. Tregonnell's room for a minute or two, to witness a deed he is going to execute.'

Hester looked puzzled.

'Mr. Tregonnell did not say anything——,' she began.

'No; he forgot that the deed would require to be witnessed. He is not very business-like in his habits. The fact is, Hester—it would be a foolish delicacy to withhold the truth from you—Mr. Tregonnell has taken a very noble view of the professional services I have rendered him. He is going to make his will before he goes to sea, and he intends to put me in for a handsome legacy. Of course, taking into consideration the difference in our ages, it is to the last degree improbable that I shall live to profit by his generous intention, but I am not the less grateful.'

'It is very good of him,' said Hester, thoughtfully; 'but I wonder that he, who is so careless about all business matters, and so indifferent to money, should think of making his will.'

'It is a thing that every man ought to do, and which a man must be an idiot if he neglects to do. Especially a man in Mr. Tregonnell's position, whose property would go to some remote heir-at-law, or possibly to the Crown. Remember he is the last of his race!'

'How sad that seems,' sighed Hester.

She, too, had every reason to believe herself the last frail sprig upon a withered tree. She knew of no kinsman living, save this distant cousin, who had sheltered her.

An hour later, Dr. Carrick summoned Hester and the servant Betsy to Mr. Tregonnell's sitting-room. Eustace Tregonnell was seated in front of the table at which he usually read and wrote. The shaded reading-lamp threw its light on the papers lying on the table, and left all things else in shadow.

Dr. Carrick stood beside his patient.

'Now sign,' he said, with his fingers laid lightly on Mr. Tregonnell's wrist.

Mr. Tregonnell signed the paper before him.

'This is Mr. Tregonnell's will,' said Dr. Carrick to th two girls, 'written entirely in his own hand, upon a singl

sheet of paper. You, Hester Rushton, and you, Betsy Thomas, are now to sign as witnesses.'

He showed them where they were to put their names, still standing by his patient's chair. Hester had not seen Mr. Tregonnell's face since she entered the room.

She signed her name as the doctor directed, and Betsy signed after her.

'You acknowledge this as your will?' said the doctor to Mr. Tregonnell.

'I acknowledge this as my will,' repeated the patient.

'That is all. Good-night, Hester; good-night, Betsy. Remember you are neither of you to mention this business of to-night to anybody. Mr. Tregonnell doesn't want it talked about.'

CHAPTER V.

MYSTERY.

That night scene in Mr. Tregonnell's room made a curious impression upon Hester. She was angry with herself for dwelling upon it so continually, angry at the weakness of mind which made her look back upon the occurrence with a kind of superstitious horror. What was more natural than that a man should make his will? What more praiseworthy than that a grateful patient should reward his physician with a legacy? Could she blame Dr. Carrick for accepting such a boon? Assuredly not. Yet the memory of her kinsman's conduct that night troubled her. It seemed to her as if Mr. Tregonnell, though to all appearance a free agent, had been acting under the influence of the doctor.

She felt that to doubt Dr. Carrick's honour, was to be guilty of base ingratitude, and hated herself for her formless suspicions.

'What would have become of me without his help?' she asked herself. 'I might have starved.'

Eustace Tregonnell said not a word about the will, and this puzzled her; for, as their friendship ripened, he had fallen into the habit of confiding all his thoughts to her attentive ear. He had told her much about himself of late. She had listened tearfully to his story of that early blight which had ruined his life—his first and only love.

'There was a time when I thought that I could never love again,' he said to her one day; 'but God is good, Hester, and now I begin to hope that even for me there may be some deep unspeakable joy waiting in the future. I would not hasten or anticipate the hour of its coming. I would not rush impetuously to meet my fate. I would rather let my happiness come gently, by degrees, like the morning light. And those are the brightest days, you know, on which the dawn creeps over the hill-tops gradually, mysteriously, pale, soft, placid.

One afternoon the conversation turned unawares upon Dr. Carrick.

'I don't think I can ever be half grateful enough to him,' exclaimed Mr. Tregonnell; 'he has made a new man of me.'

'There are few patients so grateful as you,' said Hester.

'How do you mean?'

'Do you forget the will you made the other night?'

'What will? I make a will? Why, Hester, I never did such a thing in my life. I never even thought of such a thing; though I ought to think of it, by-the-by. If I were to die unmarried, my estate would go to some remote next-of-kin; some Mr. Snooks, perhaps, who would call himself Snooks Tregonnell, and come and lord it over my Cornish tenantry. The idea is hateful. I'll go up to Plymouth next week, see my lawyer, and make a will that shall, at any rate, shut out all possible Snookses.'

Hester turned her face towards the rose-bush she was clipping, to hide her sudden pallor. All her doubts, all her fears, all her vague horror of that unforgotten scene in Mr. Tregonnell's room, came back upon her with new force. In this quiet nature of hers there were latent powers which had never been exercised. This gentle creature was a woman of strong will. She determined to question Dr. Carrick, and get to the bottom of this mysterious business, even at the risk of offending her benefactor.

Next morning, when she was pouring out the tea at Dr. Carrick's early breakfast, she attacked the subject boldly.

'Do you know that Mr. Tregonnell denies that he ever made a will?' she said. 'I happened to speak to him about it yesterday, by accident.'

'You had no right to speak to him about it,' exclaimed the doctor, white with anger—Hester had never seen such a look in his face before. 'I told you that the subject was not to be mentioned.'

'Not to other people, but my speaking of it to him could not matter.'

'It does matter a great deal. Men are sensitive about such things. He chose to make his will, but he may not choose to be reminded of it.'

'He most distinctly denied having made a will.'

'He chose to deny it.'

'What, he chose to tell a deliberate lie? No, Dr. Carrick; I would never believe that of Eustace Tregonnell.'

'You would not believe, indeed; and pray what do you know of Eustace Tregonnell, or of psychology? What do you know of the eccentricities of the human intellect? Mr. Tregonnell is extremely eccentric. There are people who call him mad."

Hester was pale as death. Mad! That awful word froze her young blood. Might not that be indeed a clue to the

mystery? She had heard Eustace Tregonnell acknowledge that will with the same lips which afterwards denied having made it. There could be no cheat, no juggle there. His own voice had declared the fact.

'If he is mad, the will is useless,' she said.

'You are a clever lawyer, no doubt, young lady. I suppose you have never heard of testamentary capacity, which may exist in a patient subject to intervals of mania. A holograph will, executed by a madder man than Eustace Tregonnell, would stand against stronger opposition than is likely to be offered to any will of his.'

'He is not mad,' protested Hester. 'His brain is as clear as mine.'

'Very likely. He merely reproves your impertinence in speaking of a forbidden subject, by denying that he ever made a will.'

Hester was more unhappy, after that conversation with Dr. Carrick, than she had been before. She had formed a high estimate of Eustace Tregonnell's character. The idea that he could tell a deliberate falsehood was horrible to her. Yet it was almost worse to think of him as a madman. And who but a madman would have looked her calmly in the face, and denied a fact which she had seen with her eyes, and attested with her signature?

'If he is mad,' she said to herself, 'my woman's wit must keep watch for him.'

And then, for the first time, a secret that had lain hidden in her heart for many days past came boldly forth into the light, and looked Hester Rushton in the face. She loved him—she, the obscure orphan, the dependant on a poor man's charity, blest with neither beauty nor accomplishments, a humble household drudge—she loved Eustace Tregonnell, the proudest and richest landowner in that part of the country. She blushed rosy-red, and hid her face from the bold, glad sunlight, abashed and stricken by the discovery. How could she dare to lift her eyes to that perfect face, to think of Eustace Tregonnell as a being on the same level with her insignificant self?

'But I don't think of him as my equal,' she said to herself; 'not for worlds would I have him come down to my level. He is my bright particular star. I only want to look up to him, and worship him all the days of my life.'

The idea of some evil mystery in that scene of the will haunted her perpetually. She began to have a horror of the house that sheltered her—that strange old house, with its long narrow passages, winding stairs, queer little closets,

many doors, and ghostly reputation. She began to have a horror of her benefactor, Dr. Carrick. Precious as Eustace Tregonnell's society was to her, she longed for him to depart upon his yachting expedition.

June began with stormy winds and driving rains, and the yachting expedition was put off. Indeed, Mr. Tregonnell seemed in no hurry to leave St. Hildred House. He appeared perfectly happy, idling in the garden while Hester weeded her flower-beds, or reading to her while she worked in her favourite seat by a window that looked seaward.

One evening, however, he announced his intention of running up to Plymouth at the end of that week.

'I want to see my lawyer. Can you guess what I am going to do, Dr. Carrick?'

'I haven't the least idea,' answered the doctor, sipping his tea.

Hester and the doctor were seated at the lamplit tea-table. Eustace Tregonnell was standing with his back to the empty fire-place, looking down at them.

'I am going to make my will. It's a disagreeable operation, and reminds one unpleasantly of one's mortality. But I suppose every man ought to go through it. I shan't forget you, doctor; nor you, Hester. Let me see: a mourning ring, I suppose, will be an appropriate mark of my gratitude to you, doctor; and a silver thimble will form a pleasing memento of my friendship for you, Miss Rushton.'

Dr. Carrick joined in Mr. Tregonnell's cheery laughter, but he cast a furtive glance at Hester, who sat looking downward, very pale in the lamplight.

CHAPTER VI.

FOR LOVE AND LIFE.

ST. HILDRED HOUSE was said to be haunted. There was hardly an inhabitant of the village who would not have vouched for the fact. Noises had been heard; ghosts had been seen, at intervals, and by divers persons, ever since the oldest inhabitant's childhood. The exact form of the apparition, or the precise nature of the noises, was not easy to determine, since every one gave a different description, and almost every one's knowledge was derived from hearsay. Till very lately, Hester Rushton had laughed at these rumours, and had never known what it was to feel a thrill of fear in the musty old passages, or to shudder as the gathering twilight peopled the corners of the panelled rooms with shadows. Now all was changed, she was nervous and apprehensive. She started at a shadow, and fancied she heard a human voice mixed with the night winds that sobbed in the wide old chimneys. One night she was disturbed by sounds that seemed distinctly human: heavy breathing, footsteps moving close to the head of her bed.

She started up, and lighted her candle, convinced that there was some one in the room. Yet she had bolted her door before going to bed.

The room was empty, but again she heard footsteps moving stealthily, close at hand.

'The cupboard,' she thought. 'There is some one in that cupboard.'

It was a long narrow cupboard, a kind of enclosed passage between her room and Mr. Tregonnell's. There was a third door in this cupboard, opening on to a corkscrew staircase that led down to the servant's offices. But this staircase was rarely used, the door leading into Mr. Tregonnell's room was never opened, and the cupboard was only a receptacle for disused and forgotten lumber.

Hester unlocked the cupboard, and looked in. A man was in the act of escaping by the door that opened on the staircase. She pursued him, candle in hand, her heart beating violently.

Something told her that this was Dr. Carrick, who had been paying a stealthy visit to his patient's room; but, to

her surprise, on the first step of the stairs David Skelter turned and faced her, with his finger on his lip, and a look that implored her forbearance.

'Oh, please, miss, don't say anything. I'm not doing any harm.'

'But why are you here—hiding in this cupboard—in the middle of the night?'

'It isn't the middle of the night, miss. I was uneasy about master.'

'Why?'

'Well, miss, to be candid, I don't like the doctor's goings on. I've had my suspicions of him for a long time. It's too much like witchcraft, the power he's got over my master. It isn't natural you know, miss, and I happened to find out that he'd been putting it into people's heads that my master wasn't to be treated like a rational being, and that turned me against him, and made me think that there was something wrong going on.'

'But what wrong can Dr. Carrick do your master, David?' asked Hester, with her earnest eyes searching the young man's face.

'Oh, miss, can I trust you? Are you a friend or a foe?'

'I am a friend to Mr. Tregonnell, David; a sincere one.'

'Yes, I believe it, miss; I've seen that, and I know something more. I know that he's a friend to you—more than a friend, nearer and dearer. He's been happier and better since he's known you. But I can't make the doctor out. He's too dark for me. Do you see that cupboard door?' pointing to the door opening into Mr. Tregonnell's room. 'The other morning, when I was putting away my master's things, it struck me that we might as well have the use of this cupboard. I tried the door, and found it locked inside. I could see the nozzle of the key in it. Then it struck me that this cupboard-door must communicate with some other room or passage, and then I remembered the door at the head of these stairs, which I'd never seen open. I came round by the stairs, and examined the cupboard, and I found a little shutter or flap opening in that door—it had been made for ventilation, I suppose—through which I could look into my master's room. And that very night, feeling uneasy about him in my mind, after I'd gone up to bed, I crept down again, and looked through the little shutter to see if he was all right. And there I saw——'

'What, David? It was very wrong to play the spy upon your master.'

'I saw the doctor conjuring him—hocussing him, miss.'

'What do you mean?'

'So, miss—like this.'

And David made solemn passes with his hands before Hester's face.

'He did that, miss, and sent master to sleep as quiet as a lamb. Now, I don't like to think that any man should have the power of sending my master to sleep.'

Hester heard him in silence, deadly pale, breathless. She had the clue to the mystery now. It was mesmeric influence that composed the patient's restless mind to sleep; it was under mesmeric influence that Eustace Tregonnell had written and signed the will, of which in his waking state he knew nothing. Among the books which Mr. Tregonnell had brought her, and one which she had read with deepest interest, was Bulwer's 'Strange Story.' She had read also that thrilling story, by the same author, 'The House and the Brain,' and the theory of magnetic influence was not unknown to her. Dr. Carrick was just the kind of man—studious, passionless, self-contained—to exert such influence, to be familiar with that unholy art. He had used his power to get a will executed—a will which doubtless bestowed more upon him than the legacy he had spoken of to Hester. But that will would give him nothing so long as Eustace Tregonnell lived, and Eustace Tregonnell was at least eighteen years his junior. How remote must be the benefit which Dr. Carrick could hope for from that will. Again, it would be cancelled, mere waste-paper, the moment Mr. Tregonnell made another will, and he talked of doing so at the end of the week. All through the night Hester lay broad awake, thinking of Dr. Carrick, and trying to fathom his motive for a deed, which was, to her mind, as dark a crime as the worst forgery that had ever been perpetrated.

'The will is made, and he will be eager to profit by it,' she thought, with an icy thrill of horror creeping through her veins. 'He is no longer interested in prolonging his patient's life. He must wish for his death; for he would not have committed this crime if he were not greedy of money. He will want to prevent Mr. Tregonnell's making a second will, and how is he to do that?'

How, save by the worst and last of crimes—secret murder?

A wild terror seized upon Hester, as she saw herself face to face with this hideous thought. The idea, having once taken hold of her, was not to be thrust out of her mind. How else, but by Eustace Tregonnell's speedy death, could the doctor profit by his crime? His profession gave him a

fatal power. He had the keys of life and death in his hand: and Eustace trusted him with blind, unquestioning faith.

'I will not leave him in a secret enemy's hand,' she thought; 'I will tell him everything to-morrow. I owed gratitude and affection to my cousin, while I believed him a good and honourable man. I owe nothing to a traitor.'

She rose at her usual early hour, with a torturing headache, and hands burning with fever. She was startled when she saw her altered face in the glass.

'I hope I am not going to be ill,' she said to herself, 'just when I want the utmost strength and clearness of mind.'

It was an effort to dress, an effort to crawl downstairs, and take her place at the breakfast-table. She was obliged to omit those small duties which had been her daily task—the dusting and polishing of the furniture, the arrangement of a bowl of freshly-cut flowers for the table.

The day was hopelessly wet, a dull grey sky, a straight downpour, that shut out everything except the sullen waste of leaden sea, crested with long lines of livid white. There was no chance of Mr. Tregonnell going to Plymouth on such a day as this.

Dr. Carrick looked curiously at his cousin's pale face, but said not a word. Mr. Tregonnell, who rarely appeared so early, joined them before the doctor had finished his first cup of tea.

He was not slow to perceive that something was wrong with Hester.

'Good heavens, Miss Rushton, how ill you are looking,' he exclaimed.

'I do not feel very well. I had a wakeful night.'

'Why, what should keep you awake?' asked Dr. Carrick, looking sharply up at her.

'I hardly know. My mind was full of queer fancies. That awful story of Bulwer's haunted me, the story you read to me a few days ago, Mr. Tregonnell.'

'Well, it is rather uncanny,' answered Eustace; 'I am so sorry I read it to you. I ought to have considered that your nerves would be more sensitive than mine. I read it to you merely as a work of art, a masterpiece of graphic style.'

'I was very foolish to think of it as a reality,' said Hester.

Dr. Carrick laid his fingers on her wrist.

'You had better go to bed, and stay there, if you don't want to be seriously ill,' he said; 'you are in a high fever as it is.'

'Impossible,' answered Hester; 'I have all sorts of things to do.'

'Of course. A woman always fancies the earth will stop, if she takes her hand off the machinery that makes it go round. I am sure you can have nothing to do to-day that can't be as well done to-morrow. If it's a question of dinner, that clever fellow, Skelter, will cook for you. If it's any fiddle-faddle about the house, a muslin curtain to be ironed, or a chintz chair-cover to be mended, let it stand over till you are well. I shall be at home all day, if I'm wanted. I've no urgent cases, and it would be too cruel to take a horse out of his stable unnecessarily on such a day as this.'

Hester remembered many such days on which Dr. Carrick had spared neither himself nor his horse. She was obliged to submit to his orders and go back to bed, for she was really too ill to resist him. She laid herself down dressed upon the outside of the counterpane, with her thick winter shawl wrapped round her, for although her head and hands were burning, a feeling of deathlike cold crept over her at intervals.

It seemed the longest day she had ever lived through. The ceaseless drip of the rain upon the leaves of the sycamore, whose spreading branches obscured half her window, the unchanging grey of the sky, the sullen murmur of the sea—all added to her gloom of mind. She would have given worlds to have seen Eustace Tregonnell alone, to have told him all she had discovered, all she feared; but she felt powerless to rise from her bed, and, even if she could muster strength and courage to go downstairs in quest of Mr. Tregonnell, she knew that Dr. Carrick was on guard below, and would do his uttermost to prevent her being alone with his patient. There was nothing for her to do but to lie there with aching head and anxious mind, waiting for night.

The good-natured maid-of-all-work came to her several times in the course of the day, bringing her broth which she could not touch, and divers cups of tea, which were welcome to her parched lips. She eat nothing all day, but drank deep draughts of cold water. Night came at last. She heard the doors shutting below, and footsteps ascending the stairs. How well she knew each footfall. The doctor's soft, deliberate step; David Skelter's tread, quick, yet heavy; Mr. Tregonnell's firm, light step: the maid-of-all-work's slip-shod ascent. And then all was quiet. The church clock struck ten. The rain was still falling. There was not a star in the sky.

Hester lifted her head with an effort from the pillow where it had lain so heavily all day long. She crawled to her door, and noiselessly set it ajar, so slightly, that any one passing would hardly notice that it was not shut. Then she opened the door of the closet. The light in Mr. Tregonnell's room shone brightly through the crevices in the sliding shutter. Then she crept back to the room door and listened with all her might.

After about ten minutes she heard the doctor's step coming along the passage from his own room. He knocked softly at Mr. Tregonnell's door, was told to enter, and entered. Before the door closed, Hester heard the patient say:

'Upon my word, doctor, I don't believe I need your ministrations to-night. I feel honestly sleepy.'

Here the door was firmly shut, and on this side Hester could hear no more.

She went quietly back to the closet, and drew near the sliding shutter. At the same moment the door leading to the servant's staircase was cautiously opened, and David Skelter crept in.

All was dark in the closet. It was by intuition only that Hester knew the intruder. One rash exclamation from him and she would be betrayed. She put one hand over his mouth, grasping his wrist firmly with the other, and whispered in his ear:

'Not a word, not a movement. I am going to watch with you to-night.' And then, with infinite caution, she slid back the shutter for about an inch, and looked into the room.

Eustace Tregonnell was lying outside the bed, wrapped in his long velvet dressing-gown, in an attitude of supreme repose. Dr. Carrick was seated beside the bed, his hands moving slowly in mesmerical passes before the patient's dreamy eyes. In less than a quarter of an hour Mr. Tregonnell had sunk into a mesmeric sleep, profound, peaceful, deathlike.

So far there was no wrong done. The patient was consentient; mesmerism had exerted a healing influence over mind and body; mesmerism had been Dr. Carrick's only treatment.

'That's all, miss,' whispered David. 'He'll go away now, and leave master to sleep it out. It's against nature that one man should be able to send another to sleep, and I don't like it.'

'There is no harm in it, David,' replied Hester.

But the doctor did not leave his patient. He withdrew from the bed, and stood, with his back to the mantelpiece,

intently watchful of the sleeper. This lasted for more than five minutes; Hester still watching from the shutter, David close at her side.

And now Dr. Carrick crept stealthily across the room to the dressing-table, opened the medicine-chest, and took out a bottle.

'It's the chloroform, miss,' whispered David. 'I know the bottle.'

This word chloroform awakened a vague fear in Hester's wind. She felt as if she were on the threshold of some hideous discovery.

'David,' she whispered, close in the valet's ear, 'run down softly, as fast as you can go, open the street door, and ring the bell. Quick, quick!'

The man obeyed without understanding her. His shoeless feet ran swiftly down the stairs.

Dr. Carrick went back to the bed, took the stopper out of the bottle, and deliberately poured the whole of the contents on Eustace Tregonnell's pillow. The patient lay on his side with his face towards the fireplace. The doctor sprinkled the chloroform exactly under his nostrils. Then with a delicate hand, as carefully as if he had been covering the face of a sick child, for whom sleep was the sole chance of cure, he drew the light coverlet over Eustace Tregonnell's head, and stood looking down at the shrouded figure with an evil smile on his face.

In the next instant the street door bell was ringing violently.

'Great Heaven, who can it be at such a time?' cried the doctor, hurrying from the room, with a backward, uneasy glance at the bed.

Hester unlocked the closet door, and rushed into Mr. Tregonnell's room as the doctor disappeared. She threw back the coverlet from the sleeper's face, snatched the pillow from under his head, dashed cold water over head and face, flung open the window to the cool, moist, night air, all without loss of an instant. She, who all day had been powerless to lift her head from the pillow, seemed in those terrible moments endowed with unnatural strength.

Eustace stirred, faintly at first; then, as Hester dashed more water into his face, his eyes slowly opened, he gave a struggling sigh, and at last raised his head and looked at her, with eyes that expressed only vague wonder.

'What are you doing?' he asked. 'What is the matter?'

'I think I have saved your life,' she said quietly; and then her brain suddenly reeling, she fell in a heap on the

floor beside his bed, not unconscious, only giddy and helpless.

Dr. Carrick came back, saw his intended victim sitting up with his eyes open, and his cousin on the ground by the bed. A glance told him that the game was lost. He did not understand how it had happened—how Hester came there—but he knew that his scheme was a failure.

'What the devil have you been doing to me, Dr. Carrick?' asked Eustace, not in the most amiable mood after awakening from deepest unconsciousness to find himself in a pool of water. 'Have you been experimenting in hydropathy? And, good Heavens, what a smell of chloroform! My shirt must have been drenched with it.'

'You were restless, and I sprinkled a few drops on your pillow. In the name of decency, Hester, what are you doing here?'

The girl rose to her feet, steadied herself with a great effort, and looked her kinsman full in the face. David Skelter had followed the doctor upstairs, and stood on the threshold, ready to rush to his master's aid the moment he was wanted.

'I know all that has happened to-night,' said Hester, with those steady eyes on the doctor's face. 'I saw all—David and I—we were both watching you through the little shutter in that closet door. You forgot that shutter, did you not? I saw you empty the bottle of chloroform on the pillow, and draw the coverlet over your patient's head. You were trying to suffocate him. I suppose suffocation of that kind leaves no trace. You have got your patient's will—the will that leaves you everything, no doubt; and all you wanted was to get rid of your patient. You have failed this time. David, take care of your master. Neither his property nor his life is safe in this house.'

'Devil!' cried the doctor, beside himself. 'Liar! Dirt that I picked up out of the gutter—a pauper who must have begged or starved but for my help! A pretty story to hatch against me, forsooth! Mr. Tregonnell, David, I call you both to witness that this woman is either a lunatic or the most outrageous liar that ever drew the breath of life.'

'This woman is my future wife,' said Eustace Tregonnell, rising from the bed, and supporting Hester's tottering figure with his arm. 'Yes, Hester, you will let it be so, will you not? I offer you the life you have saved. It is no new thought, love; it has been my pleasant day-dream for a month past. David, you scoundrel, pack my portmanteau this instant. Dr. Carrick, I shall have the felicity of leaving

your hospitable abode early to-morrow, but I shall take Miss Rushton with me, and find a more desirable residence for her with our good old vicar and his family, until the marriage service shall have made her mistress of Tregonnell Manor. Now, Hester, my dear, go back to your room, and lock your door. I don't think Dr. Carrick will try his chloroform treatment on you; he knows that David and I understand him.'

The baffled villain stood, pale, silent, scarcely breathing—an image of humanity frozen into marble. Then he roused himself slowly, gave a profound sigh, and walked to the door.

On the threshold he turned, and looked steadily at his patient.

'The night I first saw you I was inclined to think you a madman, Mr. Tregonnell,' he said deliberately; 'now I know that you are one. I shall be heartily glad to get rid of such a dangerous inmate. My house is not certified for the reception of lunatics; and if your habits were known, I should get into trouble. Take care of your master, David. He'll want a strait-waistcoat before you have been much longer in his service.'

'That's a lie, and you know it,' David retorted bluntly.

Mr. Tregonnell took Hester to the vicarage early next morning. He told the vicar everything, and confided the young lady to his friendly care, pending her marriage. The vicar had a comfortable wife, and grown-up daughters; and Hester spent a month among these new friends—a month that was like one long dream of delight, for did not Eustace Tregonnell dedicate all his days to her society?

St. Hildred House was left empty within a few hours of Mr. Tregonnell's departure. The maid-of-all-work was paid and dismissed without warning. Dr. Carrick told her that he had received a letter from London which obliged him to leave St. Hildred without an hour's delay. A rich relative was dying, a relative likely to leave Dr. Carrick a handsome fortune.

This fiction decently covered the doctor's retreat. He was soon lost in the labyrinth he knew so well. Despair had fastened its grip upon his soul. He had tried honesty; he had tried fraud and crime. Both had failed.

'I am one of those unlucky mortals born to fail,' he told himself. *Pas de chance.* Neither God nor the devil will help me.'

Dr. Carrick made another appeal to the devil. He started in a disreputable neighbourhood as a practitioner of the lowest

order—a practitioner who stuck at nothing. For a time things went well with him, and he made money. Then came a scandal, imprisonment, disgrace; and Dr. Carrick went down to the very bottom of the social gulf, never to rise again.

For Hester and her lover life holds nothing but happiness. They spend six months of every year cruising in the brightest waters, anchoring by the fairest shores, and the rest of their days at Tregonnell Manor, where, being wealthy and generous, they are universally beloved.

'IF SHE BE NOT FAIR TO ME.'

CHAPTER I.

AFTER THE SEASON.

Miss Ferriers first season was over, and she had come back to Loxley Park little injured morally or physically by the adulation she had received, and the fatigues she had undergone. Blanche Ferrier's *début* had been a decided success. She was a very beautiful girl. Her people were rich and of a good old family. She had no brothers, and only one sister, five years her junior, a damsel who had been christened Antoinette, but who was commonly known as Tiny: a golden-haired little girl, with long legs and short petticoats, who had never left the precincts of Loxley, and was ignored altogether by that busy, inquisitive, yet superficially informed London world which was quick to accept Blanche Ferrier as the sole heiress of her father's lands.

She had been greatly admired, written about in fashionable journals, stared at to a degree which seemed to the home-reared English girl vulgar persecution. She had been wooed, but not won, and she came back to Loxley unspoiled and fancy free. Yes, unspoiled, for she was still frank and unaffected, though more given to slang and a conventional kind of short-hand society talk than before she went to town. She had not yet learnt to consider dressing well and looking lovely the sole end and aim of a woman's life; but she had certainly become fully aware of her own value, from the fashionable point of view; and she had made up her mind that when she should condescend to fall in love it must needs be with an eminently eligible lover—a man who would lift her to a much higher place in the social scale than,

as a country squire's daughter, she could by right of birth and lineage claim for herself.

Loxley was a wonderful place; and much as Blanche had enjoyed the novel delights of a London season, with all its bustle and society, she was very pleased to come home. She was very glad to have the fair-haired Tiny to bring her morning cup of tea and tray full of letters, and to sit on the bed watching her with widely-opened blue eyes while she read them, with a reversionary interest in the crests and monograms.

'What a lot of letters you get now, Blanche!' exclaimed the little maid wonderingly. 'Before you went to London you used not to have more than two or three letters in a week.'

'I have made so many new friends—acquaintances, Tiny. That is the worst snare of London life. One is perpetually drifting into new friendships.'

'But isn't it nice to have plenty of friends?'

'That depends on the kind of people one picks up. One may have too much of a good thing, don't you know, Tiny.'

'I never had,' answered the little one seriously.

'Half the letters I get are idiotic; and the writers always want me to answer them with a long account of my own doings, which is absurd. Most of my friends write from fashionable watering-places, or from country houses full of people; while here there is nobody.'

'There's papa, and mamma, and there's me!' said Tiny; 'besides the horses, dogs, and cats, and birds, and rabbits. I should call that lots of people.'

'One can't write about one's father and mother, and cats and rabbits,' answered Blanche; 'fashionable girls want to hear about picnics, and lawn parties, and races, and gowns, and bonnets. I am very glad to be back at dear old Loxley, but it's rather a drowsy kind of life, dawdling about the park day after day, or driving along dusty roads to call on prosy people, or to visit stupid cottagers. I suppose the squire will be having some people next month for the partridge shooting.

'Don't you know?' cried Tiny, bouncing up on to her knees, and nearly upsetting the tea-tray. 'We are going to have lots of company, and I am to come in to afternoon tea every day, but not to dessert, for that excites me, and keeps me awake half the night, Martin says; and I am having two new frocks made on purpose—brown velveteen and black velveteen, with Vandyke collars.'

'Do leave off talking about your frocks, child, and say who is coming. I think I know all about it, though. Mother

told me father had asked Admiral and Mrs. Beaumont, horrid old fogies.'

'I wish you wouldn't say mother and father, Blanchie. It's dreadfully vulgar.'

'No, dear. The words mamma and papa are tabooed in civilized society. Do you know of any one else who's coming, you little fetcher and carrier?'

'I took ma her letters before I brought you yours, and I found out all the news. Captain Colston is coming.'

'He's rather nice for an elderly man.'

'Mr. and Mrs. Dalraine.'

'The rector of Tivetshall and his wife. Go on.'

'Reginald Fosbrook and his sister.'

'She's horribly provincial,' said Blanche, looking down upon her country friend—who had never been presented, and stood little chance of such honour—from the altitude of a Marlborough House ball and a Chiswick garden party.

'She's very good-natured, and she helps me to dress my dolls,' protested Tiny.

'Anybody else?' asked Blanche languidly, taking her watch out of the dainty little point-lace pocket above her head. 'Five minutes to eight, Tiny. You must run away to your practice, and I must go to my bath. So there is no one else coming?'

'Nobody,' answered Tiny, with a tremendous shake of her golden head. 'Yes, there is somebody else—but I forget his name.'

'Nonsense, child! Try to remember.'

'It was something beginning with Tre—. I remember that, because it made me think he must be a Cornishman. By Tre, Pol, and Pen, you may know the Cornishmen. Tremayne? Yes, that was it—Tremayne.'

Blanche blushed, and looked vexed.

'What, is *he* coming?' she exclaimed.

'Yes. You know him, then? Mamma said he had never been here before, though his father was an old, old friend of papa's.'

'I met him in London.'

'Is he nice?' asked Tiny.

'How do I know what a chit like you considers nice? Run away, Tiny—I must dress.'

Tiny slipped off to the schoolroom; yet, although breakfast at Loxley was a sharp nine, and Mr. Ferrier exacted the presence of his daughter at family prayer ten minutes before the hour, Blanche lay for some minutes idly musing, with the little watch in her hand. 'I wish he were not coming,' she thought; it will be so

awkward. Father is so weak about old friendships. Perhaps he will tell them that I refused him—or he may repeat his offer. He is a persistent young man. Not that it will make the slightest difference to me. I like him very well as a friend—but my mind is quite made up. I shall never care for him enough to marry him: and it would be a very poor match. A man who is still waiting for his captaincy, and whose wife would have to go wherever his regiment is ordered—to India, most likely. He would do very well for poor Louie Fosbrook. I know she would like to be married, and to see something of life.'

The party invited for September seemed to Blanche, measured by her new metropolitan standard, a very humdrum provincial gathering; yet the expectation of these visitors helped her to bear the solitude of a small family circle with tolerable patience. She had been back at Loxley long enough to exhaust her raptures at once more beholding the dear old oaks and elms, the river, the flower-garden, the adjacent woods, her own snug rooms, furnished after her own idea of elegance and comfort, crowded with objects of art and virtu bought with her own money. These things, which had delighted her for the first week, now began to pall; and she looked forward to the arrival of the September guests with more eagerness than she would have confessed to her fashionable girl friends, who had taught her by their own shining example that the proper tone for a young woman of nineteen to take above all things between heaven and earth was a languid, slangy, nineteenth century adaptation of the Horatian *nil admirari*.

Loxley was looking its loveliest in the clear September light. It was a long, low, stone house, white and villa-like; a ball-room with Gothic windows and Gothic battlements at one end; a verandahed drawing-room at the other; hall, dining, and billiard rooms in the centre; all the rooms communicating. A delightful house for a ball or a party, as every one protested when he or she, generally she, first saw it. Above were spacious balconied bedrooms, airy dressing-rooms, Blanche's den, half study, half oratory, wholly fantastical and æsthetic, and Mrs. Ferrier's sensible, business-like morning-room, full of useful books and work-baskets, and Berlin wool frames, and with—horror of horrors—a sewing machine in one corner. It was as elegant as a sewing machine could be made, but it set Blanche's teeth on edge every time she saw it. The park was lovely; it lay in a fertile valley, just on the edge of pastoral Devonshire, sheltered by the wild Cornish hills on one side, by rugged Dartmoor

on the other. The Tamar meandered through the grounds, and was spanned by a handsome stone bridge built by Blanche's great-grandfather. All round there were woods, and hill-sides, and waterfalls, picturesque old farmhouses, rustic lanes,—a country of exceeding beauty. The village of Loxley was about a quarter of a mile from the park gates, a quiet little old-world place, which within the last few years had broken out into a railway station, a railway inn, and about a dozen pert modern villas.

Six of the eight expected guests arrived on the thirtieth of August. Admiral Beaumont, a fat pursy man, who considered himself a crack shot, and was always at war with the keepers, and his fat pursy wife, who could seldom be induced to stir out of doors, however lovely the weather might be, and who therefore hung as a dead weight upon the neck of her hostess throughout her visit. Mr. and Mrs. Dalraine—the first an old-fashioned sporting parson, who in coming to shoot Mr. Ferrier's partridges was racked with torture at not being with the staghounds on Exmoor; the second a lively little woman, always eager to thrust a finger into everybody's pie, very active, very loquacious, and greedy of amusement indoors and out. Fifthly and sixthly came Reginald Fosbrook, a priggish young man, intended for the Church, but not yet ordained; and Louie, his sister, a thoroughly rustic young woman, whose every idea was distinctly local, yet who panted for a plunge in the ocean of London life. These were all old acquaintances of Blanche's, and their presence gave no air of novelty to the house; she knew their ways and manners as well as if they had been her own flesh and blood. Yet it was lively to sit down to dinner the number of the Muses instead of the number of the Graces. Mr. Ferrier was apt to be low-spirited in the seclusion of the domestic circle, and to declare that he and the country he lived in were both going to ruin in consequence of the extravagance of society at large, and his wife and daughter in particular; while with ten or a dozen visitors eating him out of house and home he was always the most cheery and open-hearted of men.

Captain Colston and Mr. Tremayne were to arrive late in the evening of the 31st.

'I call it rather uncomplimentary to us, their not coming till the last moment,' said Blanche; 'it is saying so plainly that it is the partridges and not us they come to see.'

'From what my London correspondents told me of Mr. Tremayne, I fancy there is no doubt he would rather see one young lady in this house than all the partridges in Devonshire,' said Mrs. Dalraine.

'I'm afraid your London correspondents are horrible gossips.'

'Nice fellow, Colston,' said the admiral; 'very much in request; tells capital stories.'

'They would be more amusing if every one did not know them by heart,' suggested Blanche.

'I hate anecdotes,' said the rector, who was an inveterate punster. 'They interrupt conversation.'

Miss Ferrier devoted herself to her dearest friend, Louie Fosbrook, all that evening and all the next day. She had so much to tell, and Louie was—or affected to be—delighted to listen. She talked of the Prince of Wales as if she had seen him daily, and met him at parties three times a week; operas, theatres, pianoforte recitals, the Orleans Club, the Ranelagh, Hurlingham, Sandown Park, the Row, Chiswick, Strawberry Hill.—alas! fair Strawberry's mistress was then living and creating an atmosphere of sweetness and light in rural Twickenham, and one of the most brilliant events of the season was the Strawberry Hill garden party—her rides, her partners, her gowns, the fancy fair where she and two other girls—christened the three Graces on the spur of the moment by a long-haired Oxford poet of original and daring wit—had a stall for stephanotis and maiden-hair ferns—nothing else, only the white waxen blossoms and the fairy-like fronds.

'It was quite the greatest success of the whole day,' said Blanche. 'We wore white silk gowns with green velvet sleeves and sashes, and green velvet Rubens hats with ostrich feathers. Somebody—a particular friend of Mr. Whistler's—called us a triplet in white and green. You ought to have a season in town, Louie.'

'Impossible, dear! Father is always complaining that he can hardly afford us bread and cheese at Okehampton, and how could he ever find me the money for such gowns as you talk of? When mother was a girl she dressed upon fifty pounds a year, and was supposed to have a liberal allowance.'

'Poor thing,' sighed Blanche; 'quite too dreadful to think of, isn't it? You see, while there are half a dozen society papers that always notice one's gowns it is not possible to be shabby. One of the papers was quite impertinent to a friend of mine because she went to two balls in the same frock; said that if she couldn't afford to dress decently it would better become her to stay at home.'

'Had you *carte blanche?* Did your father let you buy what you liked?' asked Louie, envious, yet not exactly ill-natured.

'I had to get an order from the matron, as the boys do at schools. I had to get round mother, don't you know;

but I dread the bills coming in, for I know there'll be a domestic tempest when the squire sees Mrs. Black's prices.'

'And you had ever so many offers, of course?'

'Not one that I cared to accept. Sir William Pauncefort was desperately in earnest, he quite persecuted me, in fact, and mother was rather in his favour; but he is not young, and the squire found out that his estate was what he calls dipped; and there was—but that affair is really not worth speaking about.'

Of course Louie was on the *qui vive* immediately, and insisted upon being told everything.

'There was young Tremayne. He is to be here this evening, and you can judge for yourself what he is like.'

'I can't possibly wait till this evening,' exclaimed Louie. 'I was sure, from what Mrs. Dalraine said, that there was something. How mean of you not to tell me sooner! This Mr. Tremayne was in love with you?'

'Desperately. He followed us about everywhere. He belongs to a good family, don't you know, and I believe he has a very decent income, and he is quite in society. He was able to get cards for all our parties, and he haunted me like my shadow. People naturally talked. I believed he nipped several offers in the bud by his manifest attachment. People fancied I must care for him; and that if we were not openly engaged there was some secret compact between us. It was very horrid.'

'You should have asked your father to talk to him.'

'I don't think that would have been a bit of good. His father and my father were bosom friends, and nothing would so much please the squire as for me to marry Claude Tremayne, although he is not even a captain.'

'Do tell me what he is like. Handsome, of course?'

'*Comme ci, comme ça.*'

'Fair?'

'Black as Erebus.'

'Delightful. I adore dark men. So striking, so distinguished. Tall, I suppose?'

'Oh, yes, he is tall. Persecution of that kind would have been unendurable from a short man. I daresay you will think him handsome, Louie; and it has occurred to me that it would be such a nice thing if you and he were to fall in love with each other.'

'How can that be when he's over head and heels in love with you?'

'He'll soon get over a one-sided feeling of that kind. You wouldn't mind going to India, would you?'

'Mind! I'd go anywhere to get out of Okehampton. If any one proposed to take me to the Gold Coast I'd jump at the offer. *Anything* for a change. When a girl has vegetated in one poky country town till she is well out of her teens, and has never seen what the outside world is like, you may imagine how she yearns for a glimpse of it.'

'Out of her teens!' thought Blanche; 'why, poor Louie must be twenty-seven at the least.'

'Claude Tremayne would suit you admirably,' she replied aloud. 'He is an energetic young man, sure to get on in life, and the squire says he has a very nice income of his own to begin with.'

'Nonsense!' said Louie. 'You know perfectly well that you're talking nonsense. A girl never means anything when she offers a cast-off lover to a friend. Though you don't want to marry him, you'd rather he should break his heart for you than be happy with anybody else. If I want a husband I must get Mrs. Dalraine to manage the business for me; but it isn't in my nature to lay traps for a man, even when he is such a perfect being as this Mr. Tremayne. I mean to enjoy my visit to dear Loxley without an *arrière pensée*.' In spite of which protest Miss Fosbrook thought of nothing and nobody but Claude Tremayne all the rest of the day and evening.

Captain Colston and Mr. Tremayne came by the last train, and at a provokingly late hour—so late that, instead of making themselves decent after their journey and presenting themselves in the drawing-room, where the ladies were dying of dulness, they went straight to the smoking-room with the dust of travel upon them, and made themselves happy with the men, rioting upon broiled bones, bitter beer, and brandy and soda, and making the great hall resound with their boisterous hilarity. One of the squire's worst habits was his fancy for parting the sheep from the goats, and leaving his womenkind to languish in the drawing-room while his male guests enjoyed themselves and amused him in the smoking or billiard room.

Louie looked like a martyr as she took her candle and went slowly and yawningly up the wide staircase; and even Blanche, though she did not care a straw for Claude Tremayne, felt that she would have liked to hear the last news of the fashionable world from Captain Colston.

CHAPTER II.

DOWN BY THE WATER-MILL.

All the shooting men breakfasted at a ridiculously early hour next morning—the two girls were wide awake and would have liked to join the revels, but that sort of thing has a bold look—and were off and away over the hills and stubble before the accustomed bell rang for morning prayers. Mrs. Ferrier officiated at family worship, not a man save the butler and footman being left in the house.

'And I think I never heard mother read worse, which is saying a great deal,' whispered Blanche to Louie as they sat down side by side to the well-furnished breakfast-table.

Antoinette, as the mother's spoiled darling, was allowed to appear at the nine o'clock meal occasionally—that is to say, more often than not; although she was supposed to breakfast at seven in the schoolroom, with the meekest little country curate's daughter, in the shape of a governess—a young woman who governed nobody, and was sent to fetch everybody's pocket-handkerchief, yet who, being well fed and housed, and not unkindly treated at Loxley, found her lines cast in pleasant places after the barren drudgery and carking care of home.

'Have you finished your practice, Tiny?' asked Mrs. Ferrier, as the tall fourteen-year-old slip of humanity pushed in a chair between Blanche and Louie.

'Yes, ma.'

'And did Miss Ball say you might have half an hour's recreation?'

'She said half an hour, and I said an hour.'

'Well, you may have a little breakfast with us, if you don't chatter.'

'No, ma,' answered Tiny meekly, and then began in a breathless gabble to impart the morning news to her sister and Miss Fosbrook.

'I was down at the gentleman's breakfast,' she said. 'Pa always lets me pour out his tea when he goes out shooting. Isn't Mr. Tremayne nice? He was so polite when I sugared his coffee for him, and he said I poured the milk in quite the Parisian way. All the others were gobbling so

fast that they couldn't have said a word without choking themselves, but he only just eat a bit of a roll, and talked to me almost as if I were grown up. He asked all sorts of questions about you, Blanche, what your home amusements were, and if you were in good spirits; if you were fond of the country; if you rode most or drove most or walked most; if you visited among the poor, and no end of rubbish. He must be painfully fond of you, Blanche.'

'Nonsense, child! You have such absurd ideas.'

'He asked if ever the ladies went out to join the gentlemen at a picnic luncheon. He said he was sure it was going to be a lovely day, and just the right kind of weather for lunching out of doors, neither too hot nor too cold. And then I told him we did sometimes take out the luncheon for the shooters, and that I have a lovely little pony cart, my very own, what papa gave me last birthday.'

'Tiny, what English!'

'Never mind my English. Mr. Tremayne did not laugh at my English. It was good enough for him. And I told him that, if he liked, I would drive you and Louie over in my cart with the luncheon basket, and that we four could have our lunch together in Tottenham Wood; and he said that would be lovely, and that he should consider it an appointment, and whatever way the shooting party went he would be in the wood—by the little wooden bridge near the water-mill—at half-past one to the minute.'

Blanche looked the picture of indifference, yet in her inmost heart she felt that a picnic luncheon with even a rejected lover would be a vast improvement upon the formal dining-room meal in the company of three matrons, the staple of whose conversation was the iniquity of modern servants, and the vexed question of shops *versus* co-operative stores.

'I can get it for sevenpence halfpenny a pound, and of the very best quality, in Okehampton,' says Mrs. Dalraine, who, as a rural parson's wife, is bound to support local trade.

'My dear, at the Army and Navy I get it for sixpence three farthings,' retorts the admiral's lady, 'and think what a saving that is in a large establishment.'

'Their fancy soaps are admirable,' says Mrs. Ferrier.

'My pampered manservant refused to eat their American cheese,' replies Mrs. Beaumont; and this kind of thing goes on with variations all through luncheon.

To escape this Blanche felt that she would gladly eat her midday meal in the wood, albeit adder or slow worm might

lurk under the lovely hart's-tongue ferns, or deep down amidst the broad coarse leaves of the foxgloves.

'Very well, Tiny, to please you we'll go in your washing basket,' she said condescendingly.

'It will be no end of jolly,' said poor Louie, who, unable to get to London, thought the next best thing was to talk as much metropolitan slang as she could conveniently acquire. She was sadly behind the metropolis even in this, but happily did not know it.

It was a lovely spot for a pic-nic, or for a poet's reverie, or for a painter—the old mill, the miller's cottage, the rock-work, the water, the grand old oaks, the rich growth of fern and underwood offering an inexhaustible variety of subjects for brush or pencil. Blanche found it lovelier than ever to-day after her sojourn in a formal and towny world.

Tiny's little wickerwork cart and Exmoor pony would have jolted the two girls to a jelly if they had sat long in it—but they didn't, preferring to jump out and walk whenever the road was uphill or downhill. They were both in a merry humour as they tripped along the lovely flowery lanes, chattering gaily; while Tiny sat in the driver's seat, as solemn as a judge, giving the Exmoor's mouth a sharp little jerk every now and then, which was her idea of driving.

'I wonder what I shall think of your hero?' ejaculated Louie.

'Don't call him my hero—he is no hero of mine,' answered Blanche. 'I believe he is a good soldier. He was in the Ashantee war, don't you know, with Sir Garnet—and I am told Sir Garnet has a high opinion of him. But there is really nothing of the hero about him. He is a plain, steady-going young man, dreadfully straightforward and unromantic.'

'Just what Wellington was in his youth, I dare say,' said Louie, whose admiration for the unknown Claude Tremayne had been growing steadily during the last twenty-four hours.

They arrived at the fairy dell, as Tiny had christened her favourite bit of the wood, a little before the half-hour, and Tiny began at once to make her preparations for the banquet. There was the stump of an ancient oak, which had been sawn clean off three feet above the ground, and this made an admirable table.

'Lemonade for us,' said Tiny, unpacking her basket, 'bottled beer for him. Just step down to the water's edge with the bottles, Louie dear, and put them in a very cool place among the stones. Roast fowl, tongue in slices,

cheese cakes, cream cheese, plums, pears, apples, &c. I packed the basket my own self. I wouldn't let any one help me.'

'And as a natural consequence you have not brought a morsel of bread or a grain of salt,' said Blanche.

'Bread! oh, never mind. We can eat the cheese cakes with our chicken, can't we? Do you eat salt, Louie? I never do, unless people worry me into it.'

'I think we shall have to get bread and salt somehow,' said Louie. 'The lunch would hardly seem complete without.'

'You must run to the miller's cottage with this shilling, and ask them for a loaf and the loan of a salt cellar,' said Blanche; and Antoinette, who was on friendly terms with the whole neighbourhood, went dancing off upon this errand, while Louie and Blanche settled themselves comfortably upon a low ferny bank at the foot of a noble oak. In the hollow below them the little river ran brawling over its rocky bed; the steep wooded hill rose darkly on the opposite shore; the clear blue September sky was warm with sunshine that came filtering down through the dull green oak branches.

'Suppose he shouldn't come after all?' said Louie, rather despondently. 'Goodness knows how far the shooting party may have rambled.'

'No fear of his not coming. He never breaks his word.'

'But an appointment with a child like Tiny, that would hardly count, would it?'

'I think it would with Claude Tremayne. I believe he would take a great deal of trouble rather than disappoint a child.'

'Especially when that child is my sister, and when he has the hope of seeing *me*,' thought Blanche by way of epilogue. She took up the fat little antique watch hanging at her chatelaine. There was just one minute wanted to the half-hour. Hardly had the minute ended when there was a sound of crackling brambles on the other side of the stream, a rush, a cheery laugh, and a young man in velveteen jacket and brown heather knickerbockers, with coarse ribbed stockings to match, and a Scotch bonnet stuck jauntily on his head, came bounding through the underwood. He carried his gun as easily as if it had been a fopling's crutch stick, and came lightly across the bridge, a mere plank. He took off his cap and wiped his forehead as he advanced to greet the two young ladies.

He was very good-looking—tall, broad-shouldered, well built. He had dark brown eyes, bright, and frank, and true as Cordovan steel; fairly regular features, splendid teeth, black hair closely cut, a dark sunburnt complexion. Louie, who knew the few young men of her acquaintance by heart, and was sick to loathing of them—more especially as not one among them could bring his courage to the sticking-place of an absolute proposal—thought this military stranger perfection.

'And to think that Blanche could refuse such a man!' she said to herself; while Mr. Tremayne, after graciously acknowledging Blanche's presentation of him to her most particular friend Miss Fosbrook, was asking Miss Ferrier all those questions which friends ask after an interval of severance.

'And where is my little friend and hostess?' he asked presently. 'It was Tiny who asked me to luncheon. Oh, here she comes, like Eve, on hospitable thoughts intent, I can see,' as Antoinette approached, carrying a big crusty loaf on a homely delf platter. 'Do you know, little one, that I have come four miles and a half since half-past twelve, and that I left the sport just when it was hottest, in order to keep faith with you?'

Blanche looked at Louie as much as to say, 'Didn't I tell you so?'

'It was very good of you,' said Tiny, 'and I should have been awfully disappointed if you hadn't come. But I was sure you would, somehow. You don't look as if you told stories.'

Tiny was a pretty child, and she looked her very prettiest at this moment; her blue eyes dancing with innocent glee, her cheeks flushed, her breath coming quickly through half-parted rosy lips. She bustled about, making a great display of black spun-silk stockings and Polish boots, for Tiny's boots and stockings were her strong point. Her frocks in schoolroom and play-hours were anything you like—workhouse sheeting, brown holland, kitchen dusters, anything clean and comfortable. She did the honours of the feast, waiting upon the grown-ups, bringing them their lemonade or their beer cool from a shadowy pool among the rocks.

Claude Tremayne was hungry and thirsty, and he declared that the beer was nectar, and that he had never tasted such a fowl, or such home-made bread, nor had he known till to-day that the ambrosia of the gods must have been

cheese cakes. Parnassus could not compass anything more delicious.

'If you're enjoying yourself I hope you'll come again,' said Antoinette.

'Consider yourself engaged to provide me with luncheon in this spot every day of my visit,' said Claude graciously.

'Every fine day,' replied Tiny. 'You would not care to sit under a tree and eat your luncheon in wet weather.'

'You must not do such a thing anyhow, Tiny; so our engagement must be only for the fine days,' answered Claude good-naturedly.

'Yes, but if I take so much trouble for you, you must take a little for me,' said Tiny. 'You must tell me a story. I dote upon stories.'

'Shall I tell you that you are the ugliest little girl I ever saw in my life? That would be something like a story, wouldn't it?'

'Oh, but I don't mean that kind of story,' retorted Tiny, blushing. 'You must tell me fairy tales, or historical anecdotes. I like history in anecdotes.'

'A homœopathic form of history—in very small doses. Well Tiny, I'll do my best. I will unfold my repertoire of fairy tales; and when we come to the end of them I'll fall back upon Pinnock.'

'If you tell her a story she'll never let you have any peace,' said Blanche. 'She is insatiable.'

'I don't mind being badgered a little,' answered Claude, looking at the girlish face with a tender smile. 'I am very fond of children. I had a dear little sister—one only sister—and when she came to about Tiny's age——'

'She died,' murmured Tiny, who was very impressionable. I can see it in your face. I am so sorry for you.'

She crept close to him, and laid her hand gently on his coat collar, almost as if she would have put her arms round his neck. He took the little slender sunburnt paw and kissed it.

'So you can understand, Tiny, that you won't easily tire me. So far as my little stock of stories goes, it is at your service.'

'Blanche can tell beautiful fairy tales,' said Tiny, looking at her sister, 'but she always makes them too fashionable. The wicked princess and the good princess are always trying to outdo each other in ball dresses—at least, the good princess doesn't *try*, but she has a fairy godmother who must be a dressmaker in disguise, and who sends her

nome the loveliest frocks to the moment—which real dressmakers never do.'

Miss Fosbrook thought that Antoinette was absorbing too much of the conversation, so she broke in with various questions about the young soldier's career. How had he liked the Ashantee country; and how had he liked Sir Garnet Wolseley; and were the blacks really nasty people; and was it quite right they should be annihilated; and was King Coffee called so because he had large plantations; and many other inquiries of an equally interesting character.

Tiny soon got tired of modern history in this particular form, so she ran off to look after her Exmoor, who was tied up in the miller's stable. Then Claude and the two young ladies went strolling along by the side of the stream, looking at the rocks, and talking—Claude and Blanche—of the past season. The young man was a little inclined to be sentimental, and to talk of the days that were gone; but Blanche nipped anything of that kind in the bud. She spoke very cheerfully about his professional prospects. There was a talk of his regiment leaving for India before the end of October.

'That will be very nice for you, won't it?' she asked.

'Yes, I shall like it. There will be a chance of our seeing some active service, if we go up to Cabul. India is a grand country, and I am longing to know what it is really like. One reads so much, and hears so much, but there is nothing like seeing with one's own eyes.'

'Of course not,' exclaimed Louie. 'I only wish I were a man and a soldier. If I hadn't mamma and papa, and a lot of people to think about, I would go out to India as a nursing sister. They must want nursing sisters; and I am a splendid hand at mustard poultices.'

'I don't think a mustard poultice would be quite the best treatment for a gunshot wound,' said Mr. Tremayne, 'but it is very noble of you to wish for such a life of self-sacrifice.'

'I would do anything to get out of Okehampton,' answered Louie.

They wandered about in a dreamy way for a couple of hours, following the meandering stream, and talking of all sorts of things—youth, childhood, the days that were gone, and which appeared to their minds in all the beauty of things that for ever are lost; and of the dim unknown future, its hopes, and joys, and gains. There was no idea of losses. The future was to be all gain. And when the sun began to look alarmingly afternoonish they started Tiny in the

pony cart, and made themselves into a procession of three behind it. She was to drive so as not to get out of their sight, 'for fear of accident,' Blanche said gravely.

'Just as if your looking at me would prevent Dick Turpin breaking his knees!' exclaimed Tiny. 'You are a funny girl, Blanche.'

Miss Ferrier drew herself up with a dignified air at this address; feeling that a young lady who had been one of the beauties of the season ought not to be so spoken to by a chit of a younger sister. But Tiny was so thoroughly sweet, and said impertinent things in such a loveable way, that it was difficult to feel angry with her.

The homeward walk was full of life and fun. Tiny and her pony between them afforded unbounded amusement. He was a most self-willed beast, and did just what he liked with Tiny and her cart, but happily was not given to any dangerous tricks. He took his own pleasure after an eccentric fashion, standing stock-still to admire the prospect, or rattling off at a brisk trot, just as it pleased him, Tiny expostulating with him or lecturing him all the time, as if he had been a Christian.

Claude and Blanche were on the most easy terms, talking and laughing with each other. He seemed to quite forget that he was a rejected lover, and, indeed, made himself as happy as if he were an accepted one. He was very friendly and pleasant with Miss Fosbrook; but that young lady was sharp enough to know that she was making no impression upon him. She told Blanche as much that night when they were undressing. They occupied adjacent rooms, with a door of communication, and could ramble in and out of each other's apartments as they pleased.

'It's no use, Blanche. I'm not in it,' said Louie, brushing her hair rather viciously. 'He thought no more of me this afternoon than if I had been one of those tree stumps. He's desperately gone upon you.'

'Well, Louie, I like to be candid,' replied Blanche gravely, 'I believe he is foolishly fond of me. It's a great pity.'

'Fiddlesticks!' said her friend, giving a tug at her hair which snapped three teeth out of her comb, 'you know you mean to accept him—in the end.'

'Indeed I do not.'

'Then he ought not to be here.'

'I know that. It is all the squire's doing. I suppose he thinks I am one of those wishy-washy girls who don't know their own minds, and can be got to accept any man who

pays them attention. Father ought to remember that I'm his daughter, and that it's natural for me to have a will of my own.'

'He's so nice,' replied Louie, sitting down and pleating the lace on her dressing-gown in a dreamy way.

'My father?'

'Mr. Tremayne. Why, you know of whom we were talking. He is so good-looking—such thoroughly good form—nothing provincial about him. And you say he has a good income?'

'Fifteen hundred a year from a very nice estate near Bodmin—some of the best land in Cornwall, the squire says.'

'His pay would make that two thousand, I suppose?'

'Not till he is a full colonel. It would be a very bad match for a girl who had nothing of her own, but as there are only Antoinette and I—when I am—as I hope I shall be before then—quite an old woman, and the father and mother are gone, there would be my fortune, and we should be decently off. It isn't because he is not rich that I refused him, Louie. If I cared for him I shouldn't mind that.'

'I should hope not,' said Louisa sententiously.

'But I think, considering the—the—attention I received in society, I ought to make a better match,' pursued Blanche, musingly.

'That's what you are hankering after. You are very horrid. You don't deserve to have such a good, true-hearted fellow in love with you. However, I suppose I ought not to make myself disagreable.'

'I'm not angry, Louie. You are a dear good old thing, but it's rather hard lines that I should be scolded because I am not in love with Mr. Tremayne. I can't think what there is in the young man that everybody should make such a fuss about him. Mother thinks him perfection, and the squire is never tired of praising him. And now here is Tiny falling down and worshipping him.'

'How pretty Tiny is growing!' said Louie; 'she will be quite a beauty by the time she is eighteen.'

'Do you think so?' asked Blanche indifferently.

A girl who has come out, and has been flattered and praised, is rarely awake to the development of a fourteen-year-old sister's charms. Blanche felt that there was an impassable gulf between her and Tiny. When Tiny's turn came to be admired, she, Blanche, would be an old woman.

'She has such lovely dark blue eyes—and how dark and long the lashes have grown—and such a dear little dot of a nose.'

'A snub,' said Blanche, laughing.

'No, dear, a *retroussé* nose—tip-tilted like——'

'Please don't,' cried Blanche, almost with a scream, 'for pity's sake spare me that quotation. I have met with it in every novel I have read since the poem was published. I'm very glad you think Antoinette improving. She was a plain child, but those plain children sometimes turn out well.'

'She has such quaint, old-fashioned ways.'

'Yes, she is a winning little thing—not clever, but very sweet.'

CHAPTER III.

'BEING SO VERY WILFUL YOU MUST GO.'

WHAT Blanche had said about him was perfectly true. Mr. Tremayne contrived somehow, without asserting himself in the least degree, to make everybody respect and admire him. Perhaps it was chiefly because he did not assert himself that people thought so much of him. He had no remarkable gifts—he was not an admirable Crichton; but the few things he pretended to do he did thoroughly well. He rode splendidly; was a first-rate shot, and a good billiard player; carried himself as well as a trained athlete. He was fond of music; but he neither played nor sang. He was not a great linguist; and he had distinguished himself in the technical and strictly professional part of his education rather than in humane letters. Nobody could call him a brilliant young man; but there was a solidity about him and a thorough earnestness which won everybody's respect.

He and Tiny became sworn friends. The child's tender heart had been touched by that pathetic look which came into his face when he spoke of his dead sister. She was always trying to console him, in her quiet, unobtrusive way. Whenever she could get away from lessons and Miss Ball she was pretty sure to be found in the hall, or the gardens, or the billiard-room, with Mr. Tremayne. Very often, of course, Blanche and Louie were there too; for Mr. Tremayne being the only young man in the house, the two elder girls were not absolutely averse from his society.

Blanche felt sometimes that she was being dangerously kind to him. The poor young man was laying up misery for himself in the future by this pleasant easy-going companionship in the present.

'He had no right to come here,' she told herself when conscience reproached her on this count. 'It is all his own fault.'

'Of course you mean to accept him?' said Louie, sticking to her text. 'You are only trifling with yourself and with him. You mean to begin your honeymoon in a P. and O. steamer, and finish it in the Bolan Pass.'

Blanche protested that she meant nothing of the kind; but she went on riding and driving and walking, and gipsy

tea drinking, and billiard and tennis playing with Mr. Tremayne all the same. He was there, and she was there, and they fell into each other's company as naturally as waters mingle where rivers meet. If any harm came of it the fault was his.

Harm did come to him evidently, for on the last day of his visit, late in sear and yellow October, when the leaves were strewn in the woodland, and the little river brawled fiercely as it rushed over its rocky bed, and the autumn winds swept across the hills, and tore savagely at the topmost branches of the oaks, Claude Tremayne contrived to be alone with Blanche in Loxley Park, down by the river: it was the same stream that meandered as a rivulet through the wood, but here it was wide and shallow and placid.

His regiment was under orders for India. The steamer was to leave on the 15th of November.

'Blanche, do you remember what I told you that day at Hurlingham?' he asked, with grave tenderness.

'I am not likely to forget; but please don't talk about it. It is a pity. It can do no good.'

'Blanche, you don't mean to say that you are going to reject me again—that I am not something more to you than I was that day? I felt afterwards that I had been too eager. I had no right to hope that you could care for me after so short an acquaintance. It was presumption on my part—fatuity. But now that we know so much more of each other—that we have lived under the same roof—Blanche, for pity's sake,' he pleaded passionately, clasping her hand as she turned away from him, 'don't tell me that I am no dearer to you now than I was on that miserable day.'

In spite of all her sophistry, Blanche felt terribly ashamed of herself just at this particular crisis of her life.

'My dear one, if you did not mean to make me happy you never would have been so sweet to me as you have been while I have lived under your roof. You would have let me see at once that there was no hope.'

'I thought I explained that once and for all that day on the lawn,' she faltered. 'I thought the question was at an end for ever between us.'

'Blanche, could you think that? Could you think that I could be here, seeing you every day—almost every hour in the day, living in your sweet society, and that I should not love you better and better day by day, and that I should not hope to win you?'

'I am very sorry,' she said, really meaning it, 'but I do

not think you had any right to hope after what I told you at Hurlingham. It has been very pleasant to have you here—we all like you, very, very much—mother and Tiny—all of us. I am more sorry than I can say that you—that you cannot accept my friendship as freely as I give it.'

'If his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?' said Claude bitterly. 'No, Miss Tremayne, friendship will not do. It is a very precious thing in its way; but it is not the jewel I ask from you. I have been fooled—that is all. I won't be so ruffianly as to say you have fooled me. I suppose I have fooled myself. Good-bye.'

He gave her his hand—a hand that was cold as ice.

'You are not going till to-morrow?'

'I am going at once—right away, as the Yankees call it. Good-bye, Blanche, and God bless you. May you be happier than I hope to be.'

'Please don't say that. You will easily forget me. I am not worth your lasting regret.' She did not think so, but she felt it her duty to be comforting. 'You will meet some nice girl in India, and forget that you ever cared for me.'

'Good-bye,' he said, 'I have barely time to finish my packing.'

He wrung her hand, and left her standing on the bridge, looking at the melancholy river. It was a suicidal autumn day, sunless and dreary, and all the trees were shedding their leaves, flip, flap, with a monotonous sound on the damp grass. It was a creepy day, and Blanche felt as if twenty sealskins one atop of the other could not have kept out the cold.

An hour later, Antoinette, returning from a severe duty walk, under convoy of Miss Ball, met Claude Tremayne hurrying across the park to the station, gun-case in hand. The rest of his goods were being wheeled down in the stableman's truck.

'Good gracious!' cried Tiny, rosy in her brown fur-bordered pelisse, so bright-looking that she seemed to have absorbed into herself all the sunshine that ought to have lighted the autum day. 'What does this mean? I thought you were not going till to-morrow.'

'I have a heap of business to get through in London, so I decided on taking Time by the forelock, and going to-day.'

'I wish Time had no forelock. I wish the nasty old thing was altogether bald,' cried Tiny. 'There'll be no one to draw horses and dogs for me to-night, or to play billiards with me, or to tell stories. I am awfully sorry. And how

white and ill you look! I do believe you are going away without having had your tea.'

'That is a melancholy fact, Tiny. There was no time for tea.'

'Be sure you have some at Plymouth, then.'

'I believe I shall stop at Plymouth, sleep at the Duke of Cornwall, and go on by the first express in the morning.'

'In that case you might just as well stop here, and leave here by the first train.'

'I think not, Tiny. Loxley is at the very end of the world. I must gain something by getting on to Plymouth to-night.'

'And I shall lose a great deal,' said Tiny, pouting. 'You are very selfish.'

'Tiny, I think it is you who are selfish,' remarked Miss Ball, who felt she ought to be earning her salary.

'Good-bye, little one, and may every year that parts us bring you new joys and new graces,' said Claude tenderly.

'You may kiss me if you like, this once, as you are going away,' said Tiny, standing on tiptoe.

Miss Ball screamed, but before she could interfere the farewell kiss—a mutual one—was given, and Claude Tremayne was gone.

CHAPTER IV.

'O LOVE, TO THINK THAT LOVE CAN PASS AWAY!'

FOUR London seasons had come and gone since Claude Tremayne walked to the little station at Loxley, and turned his back upon Devonian woods and Cornish hills, with a dull, aching sense of desolation which he fancied meant a broken heart. Four seasons, and Blanche was still Blanche Ferrier, and still held her place among the beauties. Of course she was getting terribly old, rising twenty-four. She assured her dear rustic Louie—who still languished at Okehampton—that she felt quite an old woman. But happily for her peace of mind her glass told her that she did not look a day the worse for those four years—nay, rather that time had only ripened and expanded her beauty. Her eyes were brighter, her complexion was more peach-like, her smile more fascinating; there was less of girlish innocence, and more of mind and spirit in her face. And just now girlish simplicity is at a discount. Miss Ferrier had a reputation for saying sharp things. She put people down. Duchesses had been known to quail before her. The Countess of Valois and Plantagenet shivered when Blanche drew her bow at a venture. There was no knowing where her arrows would hit or whom.

Her dearest friends said she was bitter—a natural result of disappointment. 'She expected to make a great match don't you know,' said one young lady to her partner at a state-ball, 'and somehow she——'

'Has missed her tip,' interjected Krutch, of the War Office, with whom the speaker was dancing. 'Don't you believe a word of it. She could have married Colonel Devereux if she had liked—the richest officer in the Blues—no end of coin, splendid place in the Midlands,—but she turned him up after carryin' on shameful with him. I call it disgustin'. And there was Sir Moses Chumley, fellow in the City—a million of money, and not an h to his name. She might have had him.'

'As if any decently brought-up young woman would marry an uneducated man!' exclaimed Krutch's partner, with a toss of her head; and yet she would have been very glad to have had the refusal of Sir Moses.

Krutch was quite correct in his facts. If Blanche Ferrier's career was, in actual practical result, a failure, the failure was her own fault. She might have made a splendid marriage had she so pleased. She might have had her wedding-gown, and her bridesmaids' gowns, and her wedding presents expatiated upon in all the society journals, down to those latest penny fashionables, the *Kennington Park* and *Camberwell Green*, but she would not. She had met with no one among her numerous admirers who could make her stony heart beat faster. The Pygmalion who was to warm this statue into life had not yet appeared. She was too honest, too well-bred, and too well-born a girl to give herself to any man whom she could not love. She wanted the richest gifts this world can offer—wealth, place, title—but she wanted to take them from hands that would be dearer than the gifts themselves; and such a giver had not yet appeared.

It may be that she felt the disappointment, and that this made her bitter: or it may be that finding herself admired for her sharpness, she took pride and pleasure in the keen edge of her wit, and cultivated the art of saying disagreeable things.

Her father and mother were not unhappy at her hanging on hand. They were not of the impecunious or scheming class, and were in no hurry to get rid of their daughter. Mrs. Ferrier was glad when once in a way some more fashionable matron relieved her of the duty of playing chaperon at a concert or a ball. She enjoyed a game at bézique with the squire in the snug little Mayfair drawing-room, and to go early to bed, and to hear all about Blanche's triumphs at breakfast next morning. But when Blanche wanted her mother, the matron was ready to go. She put on her velvet gown and the family diamonds, and sallied forth, like a Roman parent, equal to any sacrifice.

'You are a dear old mother,' said Blanche when this fourth season was over, and they were going westward in the express; 'but you are looking awfully fagged and worn.'

'London life is very tiring, dear; but I am always pleased to see you enjoying yourself.'

'Enjoying myself,' echoed Blanche drearily. 'Not much of that now, mother. I shouldn't care a jot if this were my last London season that has just come to an end.'

'What, Blanche, you who are so much admired! Surely you are not tired of the world?'

'I am—sick to death.'

'You are so difficult to please. How proud I should have

been if you had accepted Colonel Devereux! You might have been married in Westminster Abbey.'

'That would make no difference, mother, if I didn't care about my husband. I have a good mind to say this shall be my last season. Next year you will have Tiny to bring out, and she will make her mark ever so much better if she appears alone than if she has to follow in the wake of an elder sister.'

'Blanche!

'I think next year I shall stay at Loxley all the summer, and work hard at the vicar's new school. He is so anxious to keep that tyrannical Board at bay.'

This was an entirely new departure in the accomplished Blanche, who seemed to have been growing more worldly ever since her first season.

Mr. Ferrier was reading his *Times* in the further corner of the broad, luxurious carriage while this conversation between mother and daughter went on in confidential tones.

'Another victory for our troops in Afghanistan,' he exclaimed. What a pity Tremayne is out of it.'

'How out of it?' asked Blanche, looking up eagerly. 'What *do* you mean, squire?'

'Simply that Tremayne can't be in two places at once. If he is to be with us on the 1st, he couldn't be north of Cabul on the 24th of August.'

'Who says he is coming to us?

'He does, in a letter I got from Gib the day before yesterday. I thought I told you all about it. He is home on sick leave, and wants us to take him in for the first week in September I telegraphed to say I should be delighted and proud to have him. The young fellow is a hero—Lord Chillianwallah told me all about him when he was in London last June confabulating with the Commander-in-Chief. He said he only wished he had had half a dozen such fellows with him in his last campaign. It warmed my heart to hear my old friend's son so spoken of. Ah, Blanche, if you had only——'

'Please don't, father. Here is mother wailing over me because I didn't marry Colonel Devereux. You had better wash your hands of me and my matrimonial prospects altogether. I am evidently doomed to be an old maid. So long as you don't grudge me my rooms at Loxley I am content.'

'Blanche, how can you talk so!' said the mother, gazing in a rapture of admiration at the handsome face, the fine, clearly cut features, brilliant eyes, and rich complexion.

Such a girl ought to have been at least a countess; and here she was hanging on hand like a winter pear that ripens slowly on a western wall, when all the fruits of the summer have been gathered and garnered.

The 1st of September came, and of those who had assembled at Loxley Park four years ago, at least half had come back again. There were the rector and his lively wife; there was that clubbable evergreen Captain Colston, with the same stock of anecdotes, somewhat enlarged and modernized, like a shop-front in a rising town, to keep pace with the age. There was Louie—and Louie now meant two people, for she brought her husband with her—a husband who was quite the meekest thing in curates, a boyish creature, with an insignificant countenance and figure, and a Boanerges voice, a voice big enough to fill Exeter Cathedral, as Louie used to tell her friends exultantly, though whether it would ever find its way there was another thing. At present the mild youth was curate to the vicar of Okehampton, and his modest stipend had to be eked out by a contribution from Louie's father, Mr. Fosbrook, the prosperous, old-established solicitor of that town, in whose hands was the chief management of Mr. Ferrier's estate. Thus it will be seen that for the present Louie had no prospect of escape from Okehampton.

She had been lively and good-natured as a girl of twenty-seven; she was still more lively and good-natured as a matron, ordering her little man about, and arranging his life for him in a most agreeable way. She was very solicitous about his health, and was always sending his umbrella and macintosh after him; an attention which he was inclined to resent, as an insult to his manhood. She was also very particular about his eating and drinking, and thought nothing of remonstrating with him across a crowded dinner table when she saw him on the verge of an imprudence.

Major Tremayne—the subaltern of four years ago was now full major—was not expected until the afternoon of the 1st. The first raid upon the birds would be made without him. He was to arrive at Southampton in the P. and O. steamer on the 31st, and come straight on to Loxley next day by a train that would arrive in time for afternoon tea. All this he duly explained in a letter to Mrs. Ferrier, which she read aloud at the breakfast-table on the morning of the 1st. All the men—except the little curate—were off and away over the turnips and the stubble. The ladies and the priest had the dining-room to themselves.

Tiny was at her mother's right hand, helping with the tea and coffee, 'sitting in her mother's pocket,' said Mrs. Dalraine.

The girl was such a mother's pet, such a loving, sensitive creature, always nestling close at the maternal side.

'Oughtn't I to be glad to get her back again after all this weary time?' protested Tiny.

'What a sweet little creature she has grown!' said Louie to Blanche at the other end of the table, in a stage whisper.

If the good-natured Mrs. Skimpshaw—the curate's name was Skimpshaw—had a fault, it was her way of praising people before their face—her asides were always 'loud enough for Othello to hear,' as the stage direction has it.

She was right about Antoinette's beauty. She was not so striking as Blanche, not a woman before whom man must bow and photographers adore. Hers was a delicate snowdrop loveliness; complexion pale; features small, insignificant even; eyes darkest violet; eyebrows exquisitely pencilled; expression thoughtful, till she smiled; and then the sweet young face was radiant with beauty and meaning.

'Well, Tiny, I suppose you are very glad Major Tremayne is coming to-day,' said Mrs. Skimpshaw.

'Yes, I am glad.'

'You are very quiet about it, though. I thought you would be ready to jump over the moon.'

'Perhaps my jumping days are over. Miss Ball told me last week that I ought to give up my skipping-rope.'

'Never do that, my dear, while you have a skip left in you. No better exercise for your figure,' said Mrs. Delraine sententiously.

'Miss Antoinette is beginning to awaken to the serious meaning of life,' growled the curate in his tremendous bass.

'She has discovered that life is not all beer and skittles,' said Blanche.

'My dear,' cried her mother, with a shocked look, 'what are you talking about?'

A quotation of that kind is dangerous among humdrum people. They have never the faintest idea that it is a quotation, and take it for a sudden outbreak of vulgarity.

'All I can say is that after the outrageous way in which you flirted with that unfortunate young man four years ago, you are disgustingly cool about him to-day,' said Mrs. Skimpshaw, shaking her head at Antoinette.

Tiny blushed and looked uncomfortable.

'Poor Tiny,' said her mother, laughing. 'How can you

talk such nonsense, Louie? Why, the child was in the nursery when Claude Tremayne was here.'

'She may have been nominally in the nursery,' answered Louie, 'but I know she was actually wherever Mr. Tremayne happened to be. Billiard-room, hall grounds, drawing-room, it was all the same to Tiny. I should be the last to say a word about it, for I was a sad flirt in my time; but now when this estimable young man comes back, crowned with glory, and an invalid too, so awfully interesting, Tiny has not a word to say about him.'

'You are a very absurd person, Louie,' said Antoinette, who had recovered herself by this time, 'and if you don't take care I shall have a good many words to say about you.'

It was not such a day as that 1st of September had been four years ago, when Tiny instituted the course of picnic luncheons. There was a drizzling rain, and Devonia maintained her character for all-pervading dampness. It was so damp that everybody felt cold, though the thermometer was at 60, and to please her feminine guests Mrs. Ferrier had a splendid wood fire lighted in the hall an hour or so before afternoon tea. The hall was the favourite place for afternoon tea, when there were a good many people in the house.

'It will be cheery and bright for the men when they come in from shooting,' said Mrs. Dalraine.

'It will look like a welcome to *him*,' said Louie, with a sentimental air.

She was not going to be any less sentimental about Claude Tremayne because she had captured her little curate. Mr. Skimpshaw was well enough, and she was honestly attached to him in her way; but a little man who had to be more than half supported by her papa could not expect to put a veto upon her innocent flirtations.

They were all in the hall—quite the most comfortable room in the house for an unceremonious gathering—furnished with low wicker-work chairs and old-fashioned ottomans, a pair of five-leaved Japanese screens to keep off the draught, and half a dozen five o'clock tea-tables.

It was close upon the hour for the arrival of the train at Loxley station; they would hear the shriek of the engine across the park. Blanche felt curiously nervous. Every word, every look of Claude Tremayne's upon that unforgotten October evening was present to her mind now. It was as if they had parted only yesterday. His voice was still sounding in her ears. How true he had been to that hopeless attachment! Four years had come and gone, and he was still unmarried, his heart had been impervious to all

the fascinations of a more familiar intercourse with pretty women, in a society more unrestrained than that of home. She remembered all the stories she had heard of Indian life. A man must be a Bayard to pass unscathed through such an ordeal. And he had so passed. People had talked about him a good deal. She had heard his character and his deeds discussed by those who were very familiar with both; yet scandal had never breathed upon his name. She had been watching his career with a strange interest during the last four years; wondering whether he had forgotten her; wondering whether it was indeed a pearl of price which she had so ruthlessly thrown away. Often looking down the first column of the *Times* she had expected to see the advertisement of his marriage. Sometimes a name that at the first glance looked like his had startled her with a vague pain. But he had not married; and vanity whispered that he was still true to the old hopeless love.

This time she did not say to herself that he ought not to come to Loxley. She was prepared to welcome him—nay, with a good deal of persuasion she might be brought to reward him. Such constancy and devotion were indeed worthy a reward.

She had drained the cup of pleasure till the wine in the cup waxed insipid to loathing. She had cut open the drum of fashionable life, and found that all was hollow within. To be the wife of a distinguished soldier—a good, brave man, whom she perhaps, after all, could love—no longer seemed to her an unworthy fate.

All these thoughts passed through her mind between the shriek of the engine as the train left Loxley station, and the arrival of Major Tremayne at the house. She sat in a low basket chair beside the log fire, sheltered and half hidden by one of the Japanese screens, while Tiny made tea at a table in front of the blaze.

There was a loud ring, the door of the vestibule opened, and a servant announced Major Tremayne. His luggage had gone round by the stables; there was none of that fuss about portmanteaus, rugs, and guns, which sometimes makes the arival of a guest so overpowering.

He came into the middle of the hall, shook hands heartily with Mrs. Ferrier, then with Louie, who pressed forward, eager to be remembered, and then he turned and looked with wondering admiration at Antoinette, who stood beside the tea-table waiting for him to shake hands with her.

'Why, Tiny,' he exclaimed. 'Can this possibly be Tiny? Why, what a woman you have grown!'

'Did you expect me to be a child for ever?' asked Antoinette shyly.

'For ever? no, but it seems only yesterday since you bade me good-bye.'

'Only yesterday! That sounds as if the time has not been long or weary to him,' thought Blanche.

She rose slowly from her low seat, and went quietly towards him, holding out her hand. It was time that she should inflict upon him the electric shock of her presence. The shock must come, and the sooner it was over the better for him. His heart was doubtless throbbing fast in anticipation of that thrilling moment.

He took her hand ever so quietly, and shook it with just the same heartiness he had shown to her mother. He did not appear electrified, or embarrassed in the slightest degree.

'*You* have not changed, Miss Ferrier,' he said. 'Time has made no difference in you.'

'Has it not?' asked Blanche languidly. 'I feel quite an old woman;' and she did at that moment feel older than ever she had felt in her life; for she knew all in one flash of thought, that in the four years that were gone she had been falling in love with Claude Tremayne, and he had been falling out of love with her.

Yes, that sudden revelation had shown Blanche the truth, the bitter, unpalatable, humiliating truth. She had rejected Claude Tremayne twice; and there was to be no third opportunity. She who now so inclined to relenting was not to be asked to relent. He had been at Loxley a week; he was as friendly and easy with Blanche as if she had been his sister; and he was over head and ears in love with Antoinette—with Tiny, that innocent Tiny who had worshipped him four years ago in her chrysalis stage, and who had never left off thinking of him since; so much and so deeply was she smitten that she had during the last week persistently avoided him, overcome with shyness and mute as a mouse whenever she found herself in his company. But Claude Tremayne remembered the vivacious Tiny of old, full of original fancies and pretty thoughts, and he knew that in her case silence did not mean stupidity. And then when her lips kept silence her lovely violet eyes spoke to him, and told him in sweetest language that he was beloved.

Blanche accepted her defeat nobly, like a Roman maiden. Not by one sign or token did she betray her disappointment; and yet the disappointment was bitter. Long ago she had found out—from her own heart, from the opinions of other people—

that the one sovereign mistake of her life—compared with which all her other follies had been as nothing—was her rejection of Claude Tremayne. She had considered his remaining unmarried an evidence of his fidelity to her; and she had looked forward to a day when, by stooping a little from the imperial height occupied by an acknowledged beauty, she might bring him once again to her feet, and reward him richly for his truth.

He had come back with name and fame, handsomer, more distinguished, with all that ease of manner which comes of a successful and active career; and behold! he did not want to be so rewarded by her. He sought his reward elsewhere. He was at the feet of that young sister to whom society had given no cachet; a girl who had never been photographed, had never worn a gown made in Regent Street, had never been written about in the society journals.

Major Tremayne had come home on sick leave, having been seriously wounded in his last battle, and he was not strong enough to go out shooting with the men. But he was quite strong enough for dawdling about the gardens and picnicing in the wood, and before he had been three weeks at Loxley he came home from this wood one evening at sunset Tiny's promised husband.

'Then I am not to come out next year after all,' she said, laughing, when all the serious part of their talk was over, and some natural tears of hers had been shed and dried upon her lover's shoulder. 'Isn't that dreadful?'

'It is, love. Well, you shall not be deprived of the pleasure of wearing a Court mantle and a plume of feathers. You shall make your bow to our gracious lady the Queen some bright spring day—'Mrs. Tremayne, on her marriage;' and then you and I will pack up our traps and be off by the next P. and O. steamer—over the hills and far away.

THE SHADOW IN THE CORNER.

WILDHEATH GRANGE stood a little way back from the road, with a barren stretch of heath behind it, and a few tall fir-trees, with straggling wind-tossed heads, for its only shelter. It was a lonely house on a lonely road, little better than a lane, leading across a desolate waste of sandy fields to the sea-shore; and it was a house that bore a bad name among the natives of the village of Holcroft, which was the nearest place where humanity might be found.

It was a good old house, nevertheless, substantially built in the days when there was no stint of stone and timber—a good old grey stone house, with many gables, deep window seats, and a wide staircase, long dark passages, hidden doors in queer corners, closets as large as some modern rooms, and cellars in which a company of soldiers might have lain perdu.

This spacious old mansion was given over to rats and mice, loneliness, echoes, and the occupation of three elderly people; Michael Bascom, whose forbears had been landowners of importance in the neighbourhood, and his two servants, Daniel Skegg and his wife, who had served the owner of that grim old house ever since he left the university, where he had lived fifteen years of his life—five as student, and ten as professor of natural science.

At three-and-thirty Michael Bascom had seemed a middle-aged man; at fifty-six he looked and moved and spoke like an old man. During that interval of twenty-three years he had lived alone in Wildheath Grange, and the country people told each other that the house had made him what he was. This was a fanciful and superstitious notion on their part, doubtless; yet it would not have been difficult to have traced a certain affinity between the dull grey building and the

man who lived in it. Both seemed alike remote from the common cares and interests of humanity; both had an air of settled melancholy, engendered by perpetual solitude; both had the same faded complexion, the same look of slow decay.

Yet lonely as Michael Bascom's life was at Wildheath Grange, he would not for any consideration have altered its tenor. He had been glad to exchange the comparative seclusion of college rooms for the unbroken solitude of Wildheath. He was a fanatic in his love of scientific research, and his quiet days were filled to the brim with labours that seldom failed to interest and satisfy him. There were periods of depression, occasional hours of doubt, when the goal towards which he strove seemed unattainable, and his spirit fainted within him. Happily such times were rare with him. He had a dogged power of continuity which ought to have carried him to the highest pinnacle of achievement, and which perhaps might ultimately have won for him a grand name and a world-wide renown, but for a catastrophe which burdened the declining years of his harmless life with an unconquerable remorse.

One autumn morning—when he had lived just three-and-twenty years at Wildheath, and had only lately begun to perceive that his faithful butler and body servant, who was middle-aged when he first employed him, was actually getting old—Mr. Bascom's breakfast meditations over the latest treatise on the atomic theory were interrupted by an abrupt demand from that very Daniel Skegg. The man was accustomed to wait upon his master in the most absolute silence, and his sudden breaking out into speech was almost as startling as if the bust of Socrates above the bookcase had burst into human language.

'It's no use,' said Daniel; 'my missus must have a girl!'

'A what?' demanded Mr. Bascom, without taking his eyes from the line he had been reading.

'A girl—a girl to trot about and wash up, and help the old lady. She's getting weak on her legs, poor soul. We've none of us grown younger in the last twenty years.'

'Twenty years!' echoed Michael Bascom scornfully. 'What is twenty years in the formation of a stratum—what even in the growth of an oak—the cooling of a volcano!'

'Not much, perhaps, but it's apt to tell upon the bones of a human being.'

'The manganese staining to be seen upon some skulls would certainly indicate——' began the scientist dreamily.

'I wish my bones were only as free from rheumatics as they were twenty years ago,' pursued Daniel testily; 'and

then perhaps *I* should make light of twenty years. Howsoever, the long and the short of it is, my missus must have a girl. She can't go on trotting up and down these everlasting passages, and standing in that stony scullery year after year, just as if she was a young woman. She must have a girl to help.'

'Let her have twenty girls,' said Mr. Bascom, going back to his book.

'What's the use of talking like that, sir? Twenty girls, indeed! We shall have rare work to get one."

'Because the neighbourhood is sparsely populated?' interrogated Mr. Bascom, still reading.

'No, sir. Because this house is known to be haunted.'

Michael Bascom laid down his book, and turned a look of grave reproach upon his servant.

'Skegg,' he said in a severe voice, 'I thought you had lived long enough with me to be superior to any folly of that kind.'

'I don't say that *I* believe in ghosts,' answered Daniel with a semi-apologetic air; 'but the country people do. There's not a mortal among 'em that will venture across our threshold after nightfall.'

'Merely because Anthony Bascom, who led a wild life in London, and lost his money and land, came home here broken-hearted, and is supposed to have destroyed himself in this house—the only remnant of property that was left him out of a fine estate.'

'Supposed to have destroyed himself!' cried Skegg; 'why the fact is as well known as the death of Queen Elizabeth, or the great fire of London. Why, wasn't he buried at the cross-roads between here and Holcroft?'

'An idle tradition, for which you could produce no substantial proof,' retorted Mr. Bascom.

'I don't know about proof; but the country people believe it as firmly as they believe their Gospel.'

'If their faith in the Gospel was a little stronger they need not trouble themselves about Anthony Bascom.'

'Well,' grumbled Daniel, as he began to clear the table, 'a girl of some kind we must get, but she'll have to be a foreigner, or a girl that's hard driven for a place.'

When Daniel Skegg said a foreigner, he did not mean the native of some distant land, but a girl who had not been born and bred at Holcroft. Daniel had been raised and reared in that insignificant hamlet, and, small and dull as the spot was, he considered it the centre of the earth, and the world beyond it only margin.

Michael Bascom was too deep in the atomic theory to give

a second thought to the necessities of an old servant. Mrs. Skegg was an individual with whom he rarely came in contact. She lived for the most part in a gloomy region at the north end of the house, where she ruled over the solitude of a kitchen, that looked almost as big as a cathedral, and numerous offices of the scullery, larder, and pantry class, where she carried on a perpetual warfare with spiders and beetles, and wore her old life out in the labour of sweeping and scrubbing. She was a woman of severe aspect, dogmatic piety, and a bitter tongue. She was a good plain cook, and ministered diligently to her master's wants. He was not an epicure, but liked his life to be smooth and easy, and the equilibrium of his mental power would have been disturbed by a bad dinner.

He heard no more about the proposed addition to his household for a space of ten days, when Daniel Skegg again startled him amidst his studious repose by the abrupt announcement—

'I've got a girl!'

'Oh,' said Michael Bascom; 'have you?' and he went on with his book?

This time he was reading an essay on phosphorus and its functions in relation to the human brain.

'Yes,' pursued Daniel in his usual grumbling tone; 'she was a waif and stray, or I shouldn't have got her. If she'd been a native she'd never have come to us.'

'I hope she's respectable,' said Michael.

'Respectable! That's the only fault she has, poor thing. She's too good for the place. She's never been in service before, but she says she's willing to work, and I daresay my old woman will be able to break her in. Her father was a small tradesman at Yarmouth. He died a month ago, and left this poor thing homeless. Mrs. Midge, at Holcroft, is her aunt, and she said to the girl, Come and stay with me till you get a place; and the girl has been staying with Mrs. Midge for the last three weeks, trying to hear of a place. When Mrs. Midge heard that my missus wanted a girl to help, she thought it would be the very thing for her niece Maria. Luckily Maria had heard nothing about this house, so the poor innocent dropped me a curtsey, and said she'd be thankful to come, and would do her best to learn her duty. She'd had an easy time of it with her father, who had educated her above her station, like a fool as he was,' growled Daniel.

'By your own account I'm afraid you've made a bad bargain,' said Michael. 'You don't want a young lady to clean kettles and pans.'

'If she was a young duchess my old woman would make her work,' retorted Skegg decisively.

'And pray where are you going to put this girl?' asked Mr. Bascom, rather irritably; 'I can't have a strange young woman tramping up and down the passages outside my room. You know what a wretched sleeper I am, Skegg. A mouse behind the wainscot is enough to wake me.'

'I've thought of that,' answered the butler, with his look of ineffable wisdom. 'I'm not going to put her on your floor. She's to sleep in the attics.'

'Which room?'

'The big one at the north end of the house. That's the only ceiling that doesn't let water. She might as well sleep in a shower-bath as in any of the other attics.'

'The room at the north end,' repeated Mr. Bascom thoughtfully; 'isn't that——?'

'Of course it is,' snapped Skegg; 'but she doesn't know anything about it.'

Mr. Bascom went back to his books, and forgot all about the orphan from Yarmouth, until one morning on entering his study he was startled by the appearance of a strange girl, in a neat black and white cotton gown, busy dusting the volumes which were stacked in blocks upon his spacious writing-table—and doing it with such deft and careful hands that he had no inclination to be angry at this unwonted liberty. Old Mrs. Skegg had religiously refrained from all such dusting, on the plea that she did not wish to interfere with the master's ways. One of the master's ways, therefore, had been to inhale a good deal of dust in the course of his studies.

The girl was a slim little thing, with a pale and somewhat old-fashioned face, flaxen hair, braided under a neat muslin cap, a very fair complexion, and light blue eyes. They were the lightest blue eyes Michael Bascom had ever seen, but there was a sweetness and gentleness in their expression which atoned for their insipid colour.

'I hope you do not object to my dusting your books, sir,' she said, dropping a curtsey.

She spoke with a quaint precision which struck Michael Bascom as a pretty thing in its way.

'No; I don't object to cleanliness, so long as my books and papers are not disturbed. If you take a volume off my desk, replace it on the spot you took it from. That's all I ask.'

'I will be very careful, sir.'

'When did you come here?'

'Only this morning, sir.'

The student seated himself at his desk, and the girl withdrew, drifting out of the room as noiselessly as a flower blown across the threshold. Michael Bascom looked after her curiously. He had seen very little of youthful womanhood in his dry-as-dust career, and he wondered at this girl as at a creature of a species hitherto unknown to him. How fairly and delicately she was fashioned; what a translucent skin; what soft and pleasing accents issued from those rose-tinted lips. A pretty thing, assuredly, this kitchen wench! A pity that in all this busy world there could be no better work found for her than the scouring of pots and pans.

Absorbed in considerations about dry bones, Mr. Bascom thought no more of the pale-faced handmaiden. He saw her no more about his rooms. Whatever work she did there was done early in the morning, before the scholar's breakfast.

She had been a week in the house, when he met her one day in the hall. He was struck by the change in her appearance.

The girlish lips had lost their rose-bud hue; the pale blue eyes had a frightened look, and there were dark rings round them, as in one whose nights had been sleepless, or troubled by evil dreams.

Michael Bascom was so startled by an undefinable look in the girl's face that, reserved as he was by habit and nature, he expanded so far as to ask her what ailed her.

'There is something amiss, I am sure,' he said. 'What is it?'

'Nothing, sir,' she faltered, looking still more scared at his question. 'Indeed, it is nothing; or nothing worth troubling you about.'

'Nonsense. Do you suppose, because I live among books, I have no sympathy with my fellow-creatures? Tell me what is wrong with you, child. You have been grieving about the father you have lately lost, I suppose.'

'No, sir; it is not that. I shall never leave off being sorry for that. It is a grief which will last me all my life.'

'What, there is something else then?' asked Michael impatiently. 'I see; you are not happy here. Hard work does not suit you. I thought as much.'

'Oh, sir, please don't think that,' cried the girl, very earnestly. 'Indeed I am glad to work—glad to be in service; it is only——'

She faltered and broke down, the tears rolling slowly from her sorrowful eyes, despite her effort to keep them back.

'Only what?' cried Michael, growing angry. 'The girl

is full of secrets and mysteries. What do you mean, wench?'

'I—I know it is very foolish, sir; but I am afraid of the room where I sleep.'

'Afraid! Why?'

'Shall I tell you the truth, sir? Will you promise not to be angry?'

'I will not be angry if you will only speak plainly; but you provoke me by these hesitations and suppressions.'

'And please, sir, do not tell Mrs. Skegg that I have told you. She would scold me, or perhaps even send me away.'

'Mrs. Skegg shall not scold you. Go on, child.'

'You may not know the room where I sleep, sir; it is a large room at one end of the house, looking towards the sea. I can see the dark line of water from the window, and I wonder sometimes to think that it is the same ocean I used to see when I was a child at Yarmouth. It is very lonely, sir, at the top of the house. Mr. and Mrs. Skegg sleep in a little room near the kitchen, you know, sir, and I am quite alone on the top floor.'

'Skegg told me you had been educated in advance of your position in life, Maria. I should have thought the first effect of a good education would have been to make you superior to any foolish fancies about empty rooms.'

'Oh, pray sir, do not think it is any fault in my education. Father took such pains with me; he spared no expense in giving me as good an education as a tradesman's daughter need wish for. And he was a religious man, sir. He did not believe'—here she paused with a suppressed shudder—'in the spirits of the dead appearing to the living since the days of miracles, when the ghost of Samuel appeared to Saul. He never put any foolish ideas into my head, sir. I hadn't a thought of fear when I first lay down to rest in the big lonely room upstairs.'

'Well, what then?'

'But on the very first night,' the girl went on breathlessly, 'I felt weighed down in my sleep as if there were some heavy burden laid upon my chest. It was not a bad dream, but it was a sense of trouble that followed me all through my sleep; and just at daybreak—it begins to be light a little after six—I woke suddenly, with the cold perspiration pouring down my face, and knew that there was something dreadful in the room.'

'What do you mean by something dreadful. Did you see anything?'

'Not much, sir; but it froze the blood in my veins, and I knew it was this that had been following me and weighing upon me all through my sleep. In the corner between the fire-place and the wardrobe, I saw a shadow—a dim, shapeless shadow——'

'Produced by an angle of the wardrobe, I daresay.'

'No, sir. I could see the shadow of the wardrobe, distinct and sharp, as if it had been painted on the wall. This shadow was in the corner—a strange, shapeless mass; or, if it had any shape at all, it seemed——'

'What?' asked Michael eagerly.

'The shape of a dead body hanging against the wall!'

Michael Bascom grew strangely pale, yet he affected utter incredulity.

'Poor child,' he said kindly; 'you have been fretting about your father until your nerves are in a weak state, and you are full of fancies. A shadow in the corner, indeed; why, at daybreak, every corner is full of shadows. My old coat, flung upon a chair, will make you as good a ghost as you need care to see.'

'Oh, sir, I have tried to think it is my fancy. But I have had the same burden weighing me down every night. I have seen the same shadow every morning.'

'But when broad daylight comes, can you not see what stuff your shadow is made of?'

'No, sir; the shadow goes before it is broad daylight.'

'Of course, just like other shadows. Come, come, get these silly notions out of your head, or you will never do for the work-a-day world. I could easily speak to Mrs. Skegg, and make her give you another room, if I wanted to encourage you in your folly. But that would be about the worst thing I could do for you. Besides, she tells me that all the other rooms on that floor are damp; and, no doubt, if she shifted you into one of them, you would discover another shadow in another corner, and get rheumatism into the bargain. No, my good girl, you must try to prove yourself the better for a superior education.'

'I will do my best, sir,' Maria answered meekly, dropping a curtsey.

Maria went back to the kitchen sorely depressed. It was a dreary life she led at Wildheath Grange—dreary by day, awful by night; for the vague burden and the shapeless shadow, which seemed so slight a matter to the elderly scholar, were unspeakably terrible to her. Nobody had told her that the house was haunted; yet she walked about those echoing passages wrapped round with a cloud of fear. She

had no pity from Daniel Skegg and his wife. Those two pious souls had made up their minds that the character of the house should be upheld, so far as Maria went. To her, as a foreigner, the Grange should be maintained to be an immaculate dwelling, tainted by no sulphurous blast from the under world. A willing, biddable girl had become a necessary element in the existence of Mrs. Skegg. That girl had been found and that girl must be kept. Any fancies of a supernatural character must be put down with a high hand.

'Ghosts, indeed!' cried the amiable Skegg. 'Read your Bible, Maria, and don't talk no more about ghosts.'

'There are ghosts in the Bible,' said Maria, with a shiver at the recollection of certain awful passages in the Scripture she knew so well.

'Ah, they was in their right place, or they wouldn't ha' been there,' retorted Mrs. Skegg. 'You ain't agoin' to pick holes in your Bible, I hope, Mariar, at your time of life.'

Maria sat down quietly in her corner by the kitchen fire, and turned over the leaves of her dead father's Bible till she came to the chapters they two had loved best and oftenest read together. He had been a simple-minded, straightforward man, the Yarmouth cabinet-maker—a man full of aspirations after good, innately refined, instinctively religious. He and his motherless girl had spent their lives alone together, in the neat little home, which Maria had so soon learnt to cherish and beautify; and they had loved each other with an almost romantic love. They had had the same tastes, the same ideas. Very little had sufficed to make them happy. But inexorable death parted father and daughter, in one of those sharp sudden partings which are like the shock of an earthquake—instantaneous ruin, desolation and despair.

Maria's fragile form had bent before the tempest. She had lived through a trouble that might have crushed a stronger nature. Her deep religious convictions, and her belief that this cruel parting would not be for ever, had sustained her. She faced life, and its cares and duties, with a gentle patience which was the noblest form of courage.

Michael Bascom told himself that the servant-girl's foolish fancy about the room that had been given her was not a matter for serious consideration. Yet the idea dwelt in his mind unpleasantly, and disturbed him at his labours. The exact sciences require the complete power of a man's brain, his undistracted attention; and on this particular evening

Michael found that he was only giving his work a part of his attention. The girl's pale face, the girl's tremulous tones, thrust themselves into the foreground of his thoughts.

He closed his book with a fretful sigh, wheeled his large arm-chair round to the fire, and gave himself up to contemplation. To attempt study with so disturbed a mind was useless. It was a dull grey evening, early in November; the student's reading-lamp was lighted, but the shutters were not yet shut, nor the curtains drawn. He could see the leaden sky outside his windows, the fir-tree tops tossing in the angry wind. He could hear the wintry blast whistling amidst the gables, before it rushed off seaward with a savage howl that sounded like a war-whoop.

Michael Bascom shivered, and drew nearer the fire.

'It's childish, foolish nonsense,' he said to himself, 'yet it's strange she should have that fancy about the shadow; for they say Anthony Bascom destroyed himself in that room. I remember hearing it when I was a boy, from an old servant whose mother was housekeeper at the great house in Anthony's time, I never heard how he died, poor fellow—whether he poisoned himself, or shot himself, or cut his throat; but I've been told that was the room. Old Skegg has heard it too. I could see that by his manner when he told me the girl was to sleep there.'

He sat for a long time, till the grey of evening outside his study windows changed to the black of night, and the war-whoop of the wind died away to a low complaining murmur. He sat looking into the fire, and letting his thoughts wander back to the past and the traditions he had heard in his boyhood.

That was a sad, foolish story of his great-uncle, Anthony Bascom: the pitiful story of a wasted fortune and a wasted life. A riotous collegiate career at Cambridge, a racing-stable at Newmarket, an imprudent marriage, a dissipated life in London, a runaway wife, an estate forfeited to Jew money-lenders, and then the fatal end.

Michael had often heard that dismal story; how, when Anthony Bascom's fair false wife had left him, when his credit was exhausted, and his friends had grown tired of him, and all was gone except Wildheath Grange, Anthony, the broken-down man of fashion, had come to that lonely house unexpectedly one night, and had ordered his bed to be got ready for him in the room where he used to sleep when he came to the place for the wild duck shooting, in his boyhood. His old blunderbuss was still hanging over the mantelpiece, where he had left it when he came into the property, and could

afford to buy the newest thing in fowling-pieces. He had not been to Wildheath for fifteen years; nay, for a good many of those years he had almost forgotten that the dreary old house belonged to him.

The woman who had been housekeeper at Bascom Park, till house and lands had passed into the hands of the Jews, was at this time the sole occupant of Wildheath. She cooked some supper for her master, and made him as comfortable as she could in the long untenanted dining-room; but she was distressed to find, when she cleared the table after he had gone upstairs to bed, that he had eaten hardly anything.

Next morning she got his breakfast ready in the same room, which she managed to make brighter and cheerier than it had looked overnight. Brooms, dusting-brushes, and a good fire did much to improve the aspect of things. But the morning wore on to noon, and the old housekeeper listened in vain for her master's footfall on the stairs. Noon waned to late afternoon. She had made no attempt to disturb him, thinking that he had worn himself out by a tedious journey on horseback, and that he was sleeping the sleep of exhaustion. But when the brief November day clouded with the first shadows of twilight, the old woman grew seriously alarmed, and went upstairs to her master's door, where she waited in vain for any reply to her repeated calls and knockings.

The door was locked on the inside, and the housekeeper was not strong enough to break it open. She rushed downstairs again full of fear, and ran bare-headed out into the lonely road. There was no habitation nearer than the turnpike on the old coach road, from which this side road branched off to the sea. There was scanty hope of a chance passer-by. The old woman ran along the road, hardly knowing whither she was going or what she was going to do, but with a vague idea that she must get somebody to help her.

Chance favoured her. A cart, laden with sea-weed, came lumbering slowly along from the level line of sands yonder where the land melted into water. A heavy lumbering farm-labourer walked beside the cart.

'For God's sake, come in and burst open my master's door!' she entreated, seizing the man by the arm. 'He's lying dead, or in a fit, and I can't get to help him.'

'All right, missus,' answered the man, as if such an invitation were a matter of daily occurrence. 'Whoa, Dobbin; stond still, horse, and be donged to thee.'

Dobbin was glad enough to be brought to anchor on the

patch of waste grass in front of the Grange garden. His master followed the housekeeper upstairs, and shattered the old-fashioned box-lock with one blow of his ponderous fist.

The old woman's worst fear was realised. Anthony Bascom was dead. But the mode and manner of his death Michael had never been able to learn. The housekeeper's daughter, who told him the story, was an old woman when he was a boy. She had only shaken her head, and looked unutterable things, when he questioned her too closely. She had never even admitted that the old squire had committed suicide. Yet the tradition of his self-destruction was rooted in the minds of the natives of Holcroft: and there was a settled belief that his ghost, at certain times and seasons, haunted Wildheath Grange.

Now Michael Bascom was a stern materialist. For him the universe, with all its inhabitants, was but a stupendous machine, governed by inexorable laws. To such a man the idea of a ghost was simply absurd—as absurd as the assertion that two and two make five, or that a circle can be formed of a straight line. Yet he had a kind of dilettante interest in the idea of a mind which could believe in ghosts. The subject offered a curious psychological study. This poor little pale girl, now, had evidently got some supernatural terror into her head, which could only be conquered by rational treatment.

'I know what I ought to do,' Michael Bascom said to himself suddenly. 'I'll occupy that room myself to-night, and demonstrate to this foolish girl that her notion about the shadow is nothing more than a silly fancy, bred of timidity and low spirits. An ounce of proof is better than a pound of argument. If I can prove to her that I have spent a night in the room, and seen no such shadow, she will understand what an idle thing superstition is.'

Daniel came in presently to shut the shutters.

'Tell your wife to make up my bed in the room where Maria has been sleeping, and to put her into one of the rooms on the first floor for to-night, Skegg,' said Mr. Bascom.

'Sir?'

Mr. Bascom repeated his order.

'That silly wench has been complaining to you about her room,' Skegg exclaimed indignantly. 'She doesn't deserve to be well fed and cared for in a comfortable home. She ought to go to the workhouse.'

'Don't be angry with the poor girl, Skegg. She has

taken a foolish fancy into her head, and I want to show her how silly she is,' said Mr. Bascom.

'And you want to sleep in his——in that room yourself,' said the butler.

'Precisely.'

'Well,' mused Skegg, 'if he does walk—which I don't believe—he was your own flesh and blood; and I don't suppose he'll do you any hurt.'

When Daniel Skegg went back to the kitchen he railed mercilessly at poor Maria, who sat pale and silent in her corner by the hearth, darning old Mrs. Skegg's grey worsted stockings, which were the roughest and harshest covering that ever human foot clothed itself withal. 'Was there ever such a whimsical, fine, lady-like miss,' demanded Daniel, 'to come into a gentleman's house, and drive him out of his own bedroom to sleep in an attic, with her nonsenses and vagaries.' If this was the result of being educated above one's station, Daniel declared that he was thankful he had never got so far in his schooling as to read words of two syllables without spelling. Education might be hanged, for him, if this was all it led to.

'I am very sorry,' faltered Maria, weeping silently over her work. 'Indeed, Mr. Skegg, I made no complaint. My master questioned me, and I told him the truth. That was all.'

'All!' exclaimed Mr. Skegg irately; 'all, indeed! I should think it was enough.'

Poor Maria held her peace. Her mind, fluttered by Daniel's unkindness, had wandered away from that bleak big kitchen to the lost home of the past—the snug little parlour where she and her father had sat beside the cosy hearth on such a night as this; she with her smart workbox and her plain sewing, he with the newspaper he loved to read; the petted cat purring on the rug, the kettle singing on the bright brass trivet, the tea tray pleasantly suggestive of the most comfortable meal in the day.

Oh, those happy nights, that dear companionship! Were they really gone for ever, leaving nothing behind them but unkindness and servitude?

Michael Bascom retired later than usual that night. He was in the habit of sitting at his books long after every other lamp but his own had been extinguished. The Skeggs had subsided into silence and darkness in their dreary ground-floor bed-chamber. To-night his studies were of a peculiarly interesting kind, and belonged to the order of re-

creative reading rather than of hard work. He was deep in the history of that mysterious people who had their dwelling-place in the Swiss lakes, and was much exercised by certain speculations and theories about them.

The old eight-day clock on the stairs was striking two as Michael slowly ascended, candle in hand, to the hitherto unknown region of the attics. At the top of the staircase he found himself facing a dark narrow passage which led northwards, a passage that was in itself sufficient to strike terror to a superstitious mind, so black and uncanny did it look.

'Poor child,' mused Mr. Bascom, thinking of Maria; 'this attic floor is rather dreary, and for a young mind prone to fancies——'

He had opened the door of the north room by this time, and stood looking about him.

It was a large room, with a ceiling that sloped on one side, but was fairly lofty upon the other; an old-fashioned room, full of old fashioned furniture—big, ponderous, clumsy—associated with a day that was gone and people that were dead. A walnut-wood wardrobe stared him in the face—a wardrobe with brass handles, which gleamed out of the darkness like diabolical eyes. There was a tall four-post bedstead, which had been cut down on one side to accommodate the slope of the ceiling, and which had a misshapen and deformed aspect in consequence. There was an old mahogany bureau, that smelt of secrets. There were some heavy old chairs with rush bottoms, mouldy with age, and much worn. There was a corner washstand, with a big basin and a small jug—the odds and ends of past years. Carpet there was none, save a narrow strip beside the bed.

'It is a dismal room,' mused Michael, with the same touch of pity for Maria's weakness which he had felt on the landing just now.

To him it mattered nothing where he slept; but having let himself down to a lower level by his interest in the Swiss lake-people, he was in a manner humanized by the lightness of his evening's reading, and was even inclined to compassionate the feebleness of a foolish girl.

He went to bed, determined to sleep his soundest. The bed was comfortable, well supplied with blankets, rather luxurious than otherwise, and the scholar had that agreeable sense of fatigue which promises profound and restful slumber.

He dropped off to sleep quickly, but woke with a start ten minutes afterwards. What was this consciousness of a

burden of care that had awakened him—this sense of all-pervading trouble that weighed upon his spirits and oppressed his heart—this icy horror of some terrible crisis in life through which he must inevitably pass? To him these feelings were as novel as they were painful. His life had flowed on with smooth and sluggish tide, unbroken by so much as a ripple of sorrow. Yet to-night he felt all the pangs of unavailing remorse; the agonizing memory of a life wasted; the stings of humiliation and disgrace, shame, ruin; the foreshadowing of a hideous death, which he had doomed himself to die by his own hand. These were the horrors that pressed him round and weighed him down as he lay in Anthony Bascom's room.

Yes, even he, the man who could recognize nothing in nature, or in nature's God, better or higher than an irresponsible and invariable machine governed by mechanical laws, was fain to admit that here he found himself face to face with a psychological mystery. This trouble, which came between him and sleep, was the trouble that had pursued Anthony Bascom on the last night of his life. So had the suicide felt as he lay in that lonely room, perhaps striving to rest his wearied brain with one last earthly sleep before he passed to the unknown intermediate land where all is darkness and slumber. And that troubled mind had haunted the room ever since. It was not the ghost of the man's body that returned to the spot where he had suffered and perished, but the ghost of his mind—his very self; no meaningless simulacrum of the clothes he wore, and the figure that filled them.

Michael Bascom was not the man to abandon his high ground of sceptical philosophy without a struggle. He tried his hardest to conquer this oppression that weighed upon mind and sense. Again and again he succeeded in composing himself to sleep, but only to wake again and again to the same torturing thoughts, the same remorse, the same despair. So the night passed in unutterable weariness; for though he told himself that the trouble was not his trouble, that there was no reality in the burden, no reason for the remorse, these vivid fancies were as painful as realities, and took as strong a hold upon him.

The first streak of light crept in at the window—dim, and cold, and grey; then came twilight, and he looked at the corner between the wardrobe and the door.

Yes; there was the shadow: not the shadow of the wardrobe only—that was clear enough, but a vague and shapeless something which darkened the dull brown wall; so faint,

so shadowy, that he could form no conjecture as to its nature, or the thing it represented. He determined to watch this shadow till broad daylight; but the weariness of the night had exhausted him, and before the first dimness of dawn had passed away he had fallen fast asleep, and was tasting the blessed balm of undisturbed slumber. When he woke the winter sun was shining in at the lattice, and the room had lost its gloomy aspect. It looked old-fashioned, and grey, and brown, and shabby; but the depth of its gloom had fled with the shadows and the darkness of night.

Mr. Bascom rose refreshed by a sound sleep, which had lasted nearly three hours. He remembered the wretched feelings which had gone before that renovating slumber; but he recalled his strange sensations only to despise them, and he despised himself for having attached any importance to them.

'Indigestion very likely,' he told himself; 'or perhaps mere fancy, engendered of that foolish girl's story. The wisest of us is more under the dominion of imagination than he would care to confess. Well, Maria shall not sleep in this room any more. There is no particular reason why she should, and she shall not be made unhappy to please old Skegg and his wife.

When he had dressed himself in his usual leisurely way, Mr. Bascom walked up to the corner where he had seen or imagined the shadow, and examined the spot carefully.

At first sight he could discover nothing of a mysterious character. There was no door in the papered wall, no trace of a door that had been there in the past. There was no trap-door in the worm-eaten boards. There was no dark ineradicable stain to hint at murder. There was not the faintest suggestion of a secret or a mystery.

He looked up at the ceiling. That was sound enough, save for a dirty patch here and there where the rain had blistered it.

Yes; there was something—an insignificant thing, yet with a suggestion of grimness which startled him.

About a foot below the ceiling he saw a large iron hook projecting from the wall, just above the spot where he had seen the shadow of a vaguely defined form. He mounted on a chair the better to examine this hook, and to understand, if he could, the purpose for which it had been put there.

It was old and rusty. It must have been there for many years. Who could have placed it there, and why? It was not the kind of hook upon which one would hang a picture or one's garments. It was placed in an obscure corner. Had

Anthony Bascom put it there on the night he died; or did he find it there ready for a fatal use?

'If I were a superstitious man,' thought Michael; 'I should be inclined to believe that Anthony Bascom hung himself from that rusty old hook.'

'Sleep well, sir?' asked Daniel, as he waited upon his master at breakfast.

'Admirably,' answered Michael, determined not to gratify the man's curiosity.

He had always resented the idea that Wildheath Grange was haunted.

'Oh, indeed, sir. You were so late that I fancied——'

'Late, yes! I slept so well that I overshot my usual hour for waking. But, by-the-way, Skegg, as that poor girl objects to the room, let her sleep somewhere else. It can't make any difference to us, and it may make some difference to her.'

'Humph!' muttered Daniel in his grumpy way; you didn't see anything queer up there, did you?'

'See anything? Of course not.'

'Well, then, why should she see things?' It's all her silly fiddle-faddle.'

'Never mind, let her sleep in another room.'

'There ain't another room on the top floor that's dry.'

'Then let her sleep on the floor below. She creeps about quietly enough, poor little timid thing. She won't disturb me.'

Daniel grunted, and his master understood the grunt to mean obedient assent; but here Mr. Bascom was unhappily mistaken. The proverbial obstinacy of the pig family is as nothing compared with the obstinacy of a cross-grained old man, whose narrow mind has never been illuminated by education. Daniel was beginning to feel jealous of his master's compassionate interest in the orphan girl. She was a sort of gentle clinging thing that might creep into an elderly lady's or gentleman's heart unawares, and make herself a comfortable nest there.

'We shall have fine carryings-on, and me and my old woman will be nowhere, if I don't put down my heel pretty strong upon this nonsense,' Daniel muttered to himself, as he carried the breakfast-tray to the pantry.

Maria met him in the passage.

'Well, Mr. Skegg, what did my master say?' she asked breathlessly. 'Did he see anything strange in the room?'

'No, girl. What should he see? He said you were a fool.'

'Nothing disturbed him? And he slept there peacefully?' faltered Maria.

'Never slept better in his life. Now don't you begin to feel ashamed of yourself?'

'Yes,' she answered meekly; 'I am ashamed of being so full of fancies. I will go back to my room to-night, Mr. Skegg, if you like and I will never complain of it again.'

'I hope you won't,' snapped Skegg; 'you've given us trouble enough already.'

Maria sighed, and went about her work in saddest silence. The day wore slowly on, like all other days in that lifeless old house. The scholar sat in his study; Maria moved softly from room to room, sweeping and dusting in the cheerless solitude. The mid-day sun faded into the grey of afternoon, and evening came down like a blight upon the dull old house.

Throughout that day Maria and her master never met. Anyone who had been so far interested in the girl as to observe her appearance would have seen that she was unusually pale, and that her eyes had a resolute look, as of one who was resolved to face a painful ordeal. She eat hardly anything all day. She was curiously silent. Skegg and his wife put down both these symptoms to temper.

'She won't eat and she won't talk,' said Daniel to the partner of his joys. 'That means sulkiness, and I never allowed sulkiness to master me when I was a young man, and you tried it on as a young woman, and I'm not going to be conquered by sulkiness in my old age.'

Bed-time came, and Maria bade the Skeggs a civil good-night, and went up to her lonely garret without a murmur.

The next morning came, and Mrs. Skegg looked in vain for her patient hand-maiden, when she wanted Maria's services in preparing the breakfast.

'The wench sleeps sound enough this morning,' said the old woman. 'Go and call her, Daniel. My poor legs can't stand them stairs.'

'Your poor legs are getting uncommon useless,' muttered Daniel testily, as he went to do his wife's behest.

He knocked at the door, and called Maria—once, twice, thrice, many times; but there was no reply. He tried the door, and found it locked. He shook the door violently, cold with fear.

Then he told himself that the girl had played him a trick. She had stolen away before daybreak, and left the door locked to frighten him. But, no; this could not be, for he could see the key in the lock when he knelt down and put his eye to the keyhole. The key prevented his seeing into the room.

'She's in there, laughing in her sleeve at me,' he told himself; 'but I'll soon be even with her.'

There was a heavy bar on the staircase, which was intended to secure the shutters of the window that lighted the stairs. It was a detached bar, and always stood in a corner near the window, which it was but rarely employed to fasten. Daniel ran down to the landing, and seized upon this massive iron bar, and then ran back to the garret door.

One blow from the heavy bar shattered the old lock, which was the same lock the carter had broken with his strong fist seventy years before. The door flew open, and Daniel went into the attic which he had chosen for the stranger's bed-chamber.

Maria was hanging from the hook in the wall. She had contrived to cover her face decently with her handkerchief. She had hanged herself deliberately about an hour before Daniel found her, in the early grey of morning. The doctor, who was summoned from Holcroft, was able to declare the time at which she had slain herself, but there was no one who could say what sudden access of terror had impelled her to the desperate act, or under what slow torture of nervous apprehension her mind had given way. The coroner's jury returned the customary merciful verdict of 'Temporary insanity.

The girl's melancholy fate darkened the rest of Michael Bascom's life. He fled from Wildheath Grange as from an accursed spot, and from the Skeggs as from the murderers of a harmless innocent girl. He ended his days at Oxford, where he found the society of congenial minds, and the books he loved. But the memory of Maria's sad face, and sadder death, was his abiding sorrow. Out of that deep shadow his soul was never lifted.

HIS SECRET.

PART I.

TIME out of mind, since the very beginning of things, as it seemed to the parishioners of Boscobel, the Abbey had belonged to a Trevannion. It was not possible to conceive any other association with those old grey walls, those wide gardens and lawns, and flower-beds, melting almost imperceptibly into fair water-meadows, a fertile table-land sheltered by a range of green hills. Boscobel is a little town in a valley, where sweet pastoral Devon borders her wilder sister Cornwall—a quiet little town, nestling in a hollow between moorland and hill, rich in well-watered pastures, and in an ideal trout-stream, and set in the heart of a fine hunting country.

It was a shock to Boscobel when the last of the Trevannions died, leaving only a daughter behind him to inherit the Abbey estate. That the young lady was one of the handsomest women in the neighbourhood offered no consolation, since it was all the more likely that she would marry, and bring a stranger to rule over the estate, and dictate to the tenants, and make things generally unpleasant. The Squire's will stipulated that any such husband was to assume the name and arms of Trevannion: but this, in the opinion of the parish, would be an idle falsification, a poor and shallow pretence. The only Trevannions Boscobel could honour and revere were Trevannions raised on the soil. There was a general leaning to the idea that Miss Trevannion would throw herself away, albeit she was considered a young lady of good parts as well as of fine person. And this foreboding was supposed to be fully realized when it was known that she had engaged herself to Captain Wyatt, who had not an acre

of land in the county, and who must therefore necessarily be unworthy of credit.

He was an officer, who had come down to Boscobel to hunt; and his only friend in the neighbourhood was Squire Faversham, of the Copse, a young man who enjoyed the reputation of leading a wild life in London, when he was neither hunting nor shooting in Devonshire. The fact of his friendship with Faversham was taken as all-sufficient evidence that Captain Wyatt was wild, and that whatever means he had possessed at the beginning of his career had been gambled or horse-raced away before now.

Whether this dismal view of the case were true or false, Isabel Trevannion married this stranger to the soil, only six weeks after she met him for the first time at a ball in the old Town Hall: not the splendid Gothic edifice of the existing Boscobel, but the Town Hall of a hundred years ago, when George the Third was king, and when a Devonshire heiress with an estate worth three thousand a year was a much more central and important feature in the world where she lived than she would be nowadays.

Boscobel was so far correct in its theorizing: the Captain was decidedly out-at-elbows. He was a younger son in a good old Shropshire family, in which means were not abundant; and whatever small patrimony had been his at the outset, had dwindled and vanished in the course of a somewhat distinguished military career. He had fought in the East Indies under Clive and Munn, and his handsome features still bore the bronze of an Indian sun. But although Geoffrey Wyatt was about as poorly off as a man could be, his marriage with Isabel Trevannion was not the less a love match. He had fallen in love with her on that first night at the Town Hall, having ample opportunity to admire the fair frank face, to sun himself in the radiance of blue eyes, during the leisurely progress of country dance and cotillon. He had time while they promenaded the rooms to discover that the girl's mind was as bright as her eyes, and that she was disposed to think well of him. His friend, Squire Faversham, congratulated him on his conquest, as they drove home to Copse Hill in a rumbling old chariot.

'It would have been the making of me, if she'd ever been as civil to *me*!' said Faversham, with a pang of envy. 'I paid her a good deal of attention last winter, but it was no use. I'm not good-looking enough, I suppose; and then you see these young women like the idea of a soldier—an Indian hero, who may be a lord some day, like Bob Clive.'

The two young men went a few days afterwards to call on the

heiress. The Favershams and Trevannions had always been friendly, and the Squire had the right of approach.

Isabel received them with smiles and blushes and happy looks, which were not meant for Faversham. That hare-brained young gentleman knew only too well that it was not for him the blue eyes sparkled and danced so beautifully, while dimples came and went in the fair cheeks. But he was a good-natured youth, and did not want to spoil sport. He asked Isabel to let his friend see the Abbey, which was full of beauty and interest from an archæological point of view, and she rose gaily to accompany them through the rooms.

'Servants are so stupid,' she said, 'they can never explain things properly. I had better take Mr. Faversham's friend round myself, had I not, Auntie?'

This question was addressed to the dearest old lady in the world, who pretended to take care of Isabel, but whose guardianship was very mildly exercised; insomuch as she spent her existence knitting, or reading the British Essayists, in one particular arm-chair, which stood by the fire in winter and in a sunny window in summer, and never troubled herself about anything, so long as her niece was well and happy. The question was therefore merely a matter of form. The old lady smiled and nodded; the young one went off with the two gentlemen. The house took a long time to see. It was so rich in relics and memories; the remains of old monastic days, the portraits of dead and gone ancestors; curious little cabinet pictures collected in the Low Countries, mosaics and marbles bought by dilettante Trevannions in their Italian travels. Miss Trevannion and her guests lingered in the corridors, where there were most inviting velvet-cushioned window-seats. They loitered over the old china, Isabel explaining and exhibiting the family treasures with a pardonable pride. She had seen so little of this world, outside Boscobel Abbey, that she might be forgiven if she fancied the old house just the one most interesting thing in the universe. Her father had been born in it, her mother had lived and died in it, and she had loved them both so well, that the mere sense of its association with them made the gray old mansion sacred. She was pleased by Captain Wyatt's warm admiration of the place.

'You ought to see the gardens in summer,' she said, as they stood in one of the windows looking out at blossomless lawns.

When summer came Geoffrey Wyatt was master at Boscobel Abbey, and signed himself Wyatt Trevannion. His

wife idolized him, and he doated upon her; yet, like many doating lovers, they sometimes quarrelled. That even and placid affection which the poet calls thrice blessed was not theirs. They were both hot-tempered; the heiress had always been, in the language of admiring friends, high-spirited; and her high spirit showed itself occasionally, even to an idolized husband. She was jealous, suspicious of his attentions to other women; and it was Geoffrey's habit to be attentive to every pretty woman. She was jealous of his pleasures—hated him to be away from her; and she could not quite forget that he owed her everything, that he had been penniless Geoffrey Wyatt of nowhere in particular before her love made him Wyatt Trevannion, master of the dearest old house in the world, and the first gentleman in Boscobel. It never occurred to her rustic innocence that Boscobel was a very small dominion in which to be Prince Consort.

Aunt Tabitha, the dear little old lady in black brocade and gold-rimmed spectacles, did her best to keep peace between the married lovers, so long as she sat beside their hearth; but the first winter of their domestic life saw the evanishment of that gentle figure, and then there was no one to murmur tender little conciliatory speeches when the two quarrelled. Happily their quarrels, though not unfrequent, were brief, and generally ended with one of those tender reconciliations which are said to be the renewal of love.

Several winters and summers had come and gone since Geoffrey looked out at the Abbey gardens for the first time, and it could not be said that Isabel was otherwise than happy in her married life. There were no children, but this fact was taken to heart much more deeply by the inhabitants of Boscobel in general than by Isabel herself. She loved her husband too entirely and profoundly to have any sense of loss in the absence of other ties. So long as she had him she had everything; her chief trouble was that she had not always him. He was an ardent sportsman, and from September to April his days were devoted to hunting and shooting. He was fond of racing, and in the summer was often away at distant race meetings. He had a modest racing stud of his own, and had won cups in a small way. Isabel had never grudged him the money which he wasted on this expensive amusement; but she resented his frequent absence from home, and this was their chief ground of quarrel.

It was a delicious morning in July, and Geoffrey had returned the night before from one of those odious race-

meetings, and there was no hunting or shooting possible—not even otter-hunting. Isabel and her husband strolled in the lovely old gardens; all flowers and sunlight, and velvet lawn and glancing shadows of birds; she with her hands clasped round his arm, he looking down with tender admiration at the beautiful face, the soft chestnut hair falling in loose curls upon the white neck.

'Upon my soul you grow handsomer every day, Belle!' he exclaimed.

'If you really think so it must be because you see me so seldom,' she said, pleased at his praise, yet with an undertone of resentment. 'I possess that charm of novelty which other men's wives can hardly have.'

'I protest now, Bella, I was only away a fortnight this last bout; a fortnight from here to York and back again, allowing three days for the races. If you knew at what a rate I travelled, every bone in my body shaken within an inch of dislocation in their confounded post-chaises.'

'I wish it might cure you of ever wanting to go away again, love,' she said, 'and then I would be grateful to York races all the days of my life.'

'You ought to be very grateful as it is for the cup I won for you with Meer Jaffier. I don't think you've so much as looked at it since I put it in the glass case in the hall.'

'Those cups in the hall will get the house robbed some of these days,' answered Isabel petulantly. 'Vulgar, ugly things! I hate the sight of them, for they remind me how much of my married life I have had to spend alone.'

'You know you might sometimes go with me, if you pleased,' remonstrated Geoffrey.

'Yes, and have *my* bones shaken in your post-chaises, and mix with the horrible coarse creatures you meet at such places, and see sights and hear language which would make me despise myself for the rest of my life. Why cannot you stay at home, where we are so happy?'

'Yes, love, thank God we are very happy. Let us make the most of our happiness while it lasts; one can never tell how long the sun may shine. Is not this summer morning lovely—and that sunny stretch of grass—and the river beyond it—and the lights and shadows dancing on the hill? I have been reminded of my own good fortune to-day by a long letter from an unhappy beggar who was my brother officer and my equal in everything, before I won your love. Don't you think such a comparison as that should make me grateful to Providence? What am I better than Jasper Dane that I should be so blest by Fate?'

'Jasper Dane. Is that your friend's name? Tell me all about him,' Isabel answered gently, touched by her husband's talk of his happiness.

What could she wish for in life more than to make him happy! She knew that she had sometimes wounded him, had been cruel and bitter of speech, out of overweening love which ran into jealousy.

'He is one of the cleverest fellows I ever knew,' said Geoffrey; 'not showy or brilliant, but a man of unbounded common sense and solidity. We were together in India. He fought like a devil at Buxar, and yet he is one of those slender, pale-faced men who would seem more in his place in a library. He rose from the ranks—a small tradesman's son, who ran away from home on account of a step-mother's severity; and some of our fellows slighted him on that score. But thank God I had none of their petty prejudices. Dane was the cleverest officer in the regiment, and about the best behaved, and he and I were close friends. And now he has left the army, broken in health, he tells me, and he wants civilian's employment of some kind, and fancies I can help him. Yet, Heaven knows how I could do so, unless'—here he hesitated a little, as if his thoughts were straying far ahead of his speech—'unless you would like me to carry out an idea which has come into my head while I have been talking to you.'

'I should like you to do anything that is kind and friendly to an old friend,' answered Isabel. 'But what is this idea of yours?'

'I've been thinking what a capital fellow Jasper would be to manage your property for me—a kind of steward and accountant; a factotum to look after everything and keep everybody else in check. We've a bailiff for the home-farm, but the bailiff wants supervision; and we've an agent to collect the rents, and draw up leases, and so on; but we want a general custodian; one all-pervading mind; a man who could have no interest outside our interests. I have often felt the want of such a fellow—a man who would have the pluck to pull me up when I was spending too much money—who would n't be afraid to tell me I was a fool!'

'I don't think you'd like that, Geoffrey, even from Mr. Dane.'

'Oh yes, I should. Dane is one of those plain-sailing, hard-headed fellows, from whom one can stand a great deal. He used to talk to me very freely in days gone by.'

'Perhaps,' answered Isabel; 'but then you were not my husband.'

'To be sure, that makes a difference, doesn't it? But I think I could bear Dane's lecturing even now, knowing it was all for my own good. He was adjutant of our regiment —a wonderful hand at accounts; a thoroughly commercial mind, inherited from the tradesman father, no doubt. And you would not find him a disagreeable fellow about the house. He is very quiet and gentlemanlike, and has refined tastes.'

'In spite of the tradesman father?'

'Oh, blood will tell of course. I daresay you would see a difference between him and a man of family.'

'Like Faversham, for instance, who made me an offer in a letter which might have been written by my cowboy—and then was surprised that I refused to marry him. Will it please you to have this Mr. Dane here, Geoffrey?'

'I really think it will be a relief to my mind,' answered her husband. 'I have felt myself getting into a financial muddle lately; and I believe that we both are cheated and imposed upon to a large extent. You are so generous, and I am so careless. A cool, clear-headed fellow like Dane would be a treasure to us.'

'And you will not let him interfere with our domestic life? You will not let him deprive me of your society?'

'My dearest, what are you thinking of? I want the man for his usefulness—not for his company.'

This assurance satisfied Mrs. Trevannion, and her husband wrote to his old friend by that evening's mail, offering him rooms at the Abbey, with a modest salary. 'As the movement is one of economy you must not expect me to be lavish!' he wrote. 'I daresay with your talents you might do something better, but place-hunting is hard work. You say you are out of health. Our mild climate, pure air, and quiet life ought to go a long way towards curing you; and perhaps you may like to be domiciled with an old friend who has not forgotten old times.'

Dane wrote by return of post, gratefully accepting the offer; and a week afterwards he came to the Abbey, arriving in the late twilight of a lovely day.

Geoffrey and his wife were sitting on the terrace in front of the drawing-room windows, with their field and household favourites—a brace of Irish setters, a Blenheim spaniel, and a greyhound or two grouped about them. In a home where there are no children, dogs are apt to come conspicuously into the foreground.

The butler brought Mr. Dane to the terrace, and the two men greeted each other heartily; Geoffrey receiving his

friend with loud-voiced genial welcome, Jasper Dane quietly cordial.

'If you knew how cheering it is to be so welcomed in such a home as this after ten years of Indian exile, you would have some idea of what I must feel for your husband, Mrs. Trevannion,' said Mr. Dane, when Geoffrey had presented him to the mistress of the Abbey.

She murmured some vague civility, and looked at him, not unkindly but critically, a little doubtful as to her wisdom in having allowed a new element to be introduced into her domestic life. 'I hope he will keep his place,' she thought.

The man looked every inch a gentleman, in spite of his obscure origin. He was tall and slim, pale, delicate-featured, with dreamy gray eyes, and the whitest hands Mrs. Trevannion had ever seen in a man. Indian suns which had baked Geoffrey's complexion to a warrior-like bronze, had only given a faint yellow tinge, like the hue of old ivory, to Jasper's pale countenance. He had never affected out-of-door pursuits, preferring books and seclusion.

'He looks as if he would keep his place,' mused Mrs. Trevannion, whose chief thought about the stranger was an ardent hope that she and her husband might see as little as possible of him.'

'If he absorbs Geoffrey I shall hate him,' she said to herself.

The first effect of Mr. Dane's arrival was to give Mrs. Trevannion more of her husband's society than she had enjoyed before his coming. His scrutiny of the financial position revealed a state of things which demanded an immediate narrowing of Captain Wyatt-Trevannion's expenses. He had been spending his wife's money with the recklessness of a man who, having had hitherto to deal with hundreds, believed thousands inexhaustible. With grave straightforwardness, Jasper Dane showed his friend that he had been imposing on his wife's generosity, taking an unworthy advantage of her unquestioning love. If he were to continue his present course, he would end by encumbering the Trevannion estate by making his wife a beggar. The first thing to be done was to give up the racing stud.

'It's such a small one,' said Geoffrey, pathetically.

'It is big enough to spoil two thousand a year,' answered Dane. 'And then there are your bets.'

'A gentleman ought to back his own horses. It shows good faith,' said Geoffrey. 'But the stud shall be sold and I'll bet no more. You are right, Dane. Bell has been too generous to me. I am bound to consider her welfare

above everything. But a country gentleman's life without a racing stable is deucedly humdrum.'

'Humdrum, with such a wife as yours,' exclaimed Dane, with a faint glow on his sallow cheeks. 'You ought to be happy with her in a desert island.'

'I'm going to sell the racers, so you needn't sermonize,' retorted Geoffrey; and the horses were sold at Exeter shortly afterwards, Mr. Dane having held his friend to his resolution, meanwhile, with a firmness of hand remarkable in a dependent. Indeed, there were many things in which Mr. Dane soon showed himself master; Geoffrey's self-indulgent nature lending itself easily to leading-strings.

There was ample room for an independent existence in the spacious old Abbey. Mr. Dane had his own suite of rooms at the end of a southward-fronting wing, rooms which opened on the picture-gallery, where the effigies of departed Trevannions scowled or simpered under a top-light. He had sent to London for two large chests of books, the companions of his Indian exile, and with these, which were special in character, and the somewhat common-place library of the Abbey he had plenty of material for thought and study. He seemed fond of solitude—only came to the drawing-room when he was particularly invited, and gave Mrs. Trevannion no ground for complaining that he did not keep his place.

She was very grateful to him for the sale of the race-horses, and was too impulsive to refrain from letting him know her gratitude.

'Do you know I had an impression that we were being ruined,' she said; 'but I could not tell Geoffrey so. It would have seemed ungenerous.'

'You are a wonderful woman,' said Mr. Dane, looking at her gravely. 'A wonderful wife, and Geoffrey ought to be the happiest fellow in creation.'

'Well, I hope he is moderately happy. I only live to please him. Why do we not see more of you, Mr. Dane?' she went on in a little gush of kindliness, forgetting how anxious she had been to keep him out of the sanctuary of domestic life.

Happily Jasper Dane was too modest or too fond of solitude to take undue advantage of her kindness—but on those rare evenings which he spent with them, his society proved so agreeable to both husband and wife, that before he had been a year at the Abbey, his presence became a natural element in their lives, and he was seldom out of their company. They had both a high opinion of his capacity, and an unlimited belief in his faithfulness, and they appealed

to his superior wisdom and experience continually. He was a link between Geoffrey and his happy-go-lucky youth—that youth which a man is apt faintly to regret amidst the calmer blessings of mature life. He was companionable to the wife in many things in which her husband could not be her companion. She had studied French and Italian literature, and he was the first person whom she had ever met able to talk to her of Corneille and Racine, Dante and Tasso. She was fond of music, and here was the very first listener who seemed thoroughly to understand and appreciate Bach. She had a taste for art, which went beyond painting on velvet, and the beautification of fire-screens, and Mr. Dane was able to assist her with his superior technical skill and knowledge. He taught her chess, and they played many a long thoughtful game together beside the winter fire, while Geoffrey sprawled in his armchair, and slept the sleep of the tired sportsman, his only consciousness of existence a dim sense of ineffable content, mixed with the sputter and sparkle of the wide wood fire.

By the time Jasper Dane had been three years at the Abbey, Mr. and Mrs. Trevannion had come to regard him as a necessary part of their existence. It would be impossible for either to get on without him. They both owed him so much, that each would have been ashamed to confess the extent of the debt, and could only cancel it by silent gratitude. For it was not only that he had set their house in order, and introduced golden rules of thrift and method into a disorderly household, but he had brought the element of domestic peace into their lives. The horse-racing being put aside, Geoffrey's absences from home rarely went beyond a long day's hunting or shooting; and when he was away, Mr. Dane's company went far to enliven the monotony of the tranquil hours. It was not that he intruded upon the wife's solitude; but he was in his rooms—or in the gardens—somewhere on the premises, to be appealed to if he were wanted. He was always ready to be consulted about small details—a dinner, or a hunting breakfast, an archery meeting, or any entertainment which the lady of the Abbey considered it her duty to provide for her neighbours. He took a genuine interest in these things, which always bored Geoffrey. Altogether life was harmonized into smoothness by his presence; and yet he was one of the most unobtrusive of men.

Geoffrey behaved wondrously well about the racing stable. He sighed in secret over its surrender; but he never told his wife how much the sacrifice cost him, or how sorely he

missed the excitement of the turf, the intercourse with the outer world, with men of keener wit than his familiar friends of the hunt. Dane was always reminding him, in a friendly way, that he owed everything to his wife and had no right to squander her money—so when the old master of the staghounds died, and the neighbourhood wanted Captain Wyatt Trevannion to take the hounds, Geoffrey resolutely refused that honour, congenial as the office would have been to him. He told himself that Dane had spoken the truth. He had no right to waste his wife's money.

'I'm afraid if I go on in this way I shall dwindle into a stay-at-home husband, tied to my wife's apron-strings,' he thought; 'but it is something to know that Belle is happier than she used to be.'

Belle was, indeed, completely happy in these days. She hung about her husband as tenderly as she had done in the first year of her married life; and there were now few flashes of jealousy, or little gusts of bitter speech. Geoffrey was getting older. He did not admire pretty women so much as of old—was content to sun himself in that one beautiful face which he had a legal right to worship. Perhaps the placid monotony of prosperous idleness was slowly sapping his energies. He had lost much of his old fire and impetuosity; but he was better tempered than when his wits were kept on the rack by the hazards of horse-racing, and he was more devoted to his wife than ever. The worthy inhabitants of Boscobel began to forgive him for his audacity in marrying Miss Trevannion, and readily acknowledged that he made a very good husband, and was a pleasant, hospitable kind of man to have at the Abbey, a very fair substitute for the extinct male line of the Trevannions.

There was only one cloud upon Isabel Trevannion's happiness at this period of her life, and that arose from a suspicion which she tried to dismiss from her thoughts as a foolish fancy, perhaps even an unworthy inspiration of feminine vanity.

'I hope I am not that kind of women,' she had said to herself more than once; 'a woman who believes that no man can escape falling in love with her.'

Yet, reason with herself as she might, the vague uncomfortable suspicion would flit across her mind now and again, that her husband's devoted friend and faithful steward cared for her more than was well for his peace. He had never by word or look offended her modesty. She was not a woman to live an hour under the same roof with a man who could so offend. He had been her faithful servant,

her frequent companion for three placid, monotonous years: and he had never failed in the most profound respect that man can pay to woman. Custom had not lessened his reverence for her. Had she been a queen she could not have received a more unvarying homage. Yet, by some subtle power of expression, by something so undefinable and mysterious that it seemed a kind of magnetism, he had revealed a feeling which she needs must pity, even while she tried to shut her mind against the fact of its existence.

She did pity him. There were traces of pain sometimes in that pale spiritual face which touched her heart with divine compassion. There was a mute fidelity of affection which she could neither mistake nor resent. Was she not indebted to Jasper Dane for the happiness which had made her domestic life perfect? His thoughtful wisdom, his outspoken fidelity, had given her back her husband.

As that vague suspicion of hers grew into something very near akin to certainty, Isabel contrived to spend less of her life in Mr. Dane's society. Music, art, literature, had made a meeting point for their sympathies. The lady seemed all at once to have grown weary of her books, her easel, her harpsichord. She had a sudden passion for the out-of-door life of which her husband was so fond. She rode with him, accompanied him on his trout fishing expeditions in the woody combes, following each lovely wind and reach of the romantic river.

'I hope I don't plague you with my company, Geoffrey,' she said. 'It makes me very happy to be with you.'

'Plague me, love! Do you suppose I am not glad of such a companion? You used to be such a stay-at-home, with your nose always in a book, like Dane, or studying tweedledum and tweedle-dee on that harpsichord of yours.'

'Do you think the change is for the better, dearest?' she asked with that vein of coquetry which is in the grain of a woman's love.

'I should be a curmudgeon if I did not,' he answered, laying down his rod, in order to throw his arm round the matron's slim waist, and to administer a sounding kiss on the blushing cheek. 'I shall mount you on the best hunter that was ever backed, and you shall follow the stag-hounds with me next winter.'

'I should like it of all things, Geoffrey; but don't you think it would set people talking?'

There were very few hunting ladies in those days.

'Let them talk! They shall say how handsome my wife looks when she's flushed with a quick run.'

All through the decline of summer and the slow decay of autumn, Geoffrey Trevannion and his wife were close companions; the lady spending very little of her life apart from her husband, and Jasper Dane thrown back upon a severely business-like existence. He had a great deal to do in his character of land steward, rode far and wide upon the steady old brown hack which Trevannion had allotted to him, and spent all his leisure in the seclusion of his own rooms.

'I believe Dane is writing a book,' said Geoffrey, laughing heartily at what he considered a prodigious joke; 'I see his light burning every night when we go to bed. I wonder whether it is a tragedy, or a treatise on metaphysics. He looks capable of either. I used to accuse him of writing verses when we were in India.'

One day in the beginning of November, Geoffrey and his friend went for a long ride together. The master of the Abbey was required to inspect some farm buildings which wanted important repairs; an improvement so costly that Mr. Dane refused to order it upon his own responsibility. The farm was between eleven and twelve miles from the Abbey, and the two gentlemen were away a long time upon their errand, and came back looking fagged by their ride.

'What is the matter, Geoffrey?' Mrs. Trevannion asked anxiously, as her husband stretched himself in his arm-chair before the drawing-room fire, while he waited for the dinner bell; 'I never saw you look so pale.'

'It was a chilly, wearisome ride, and Dane plagued my soul out with his talk about business. I am sorry to tell you that he is going to leave us.'

She gave a little start, and the colour faded from her cheek, as if with the apprehension of evil. The fear which startled her was vague and far off, but it was fear.

'I am sorry for your sake," she said quietly. 'I'm afraid you will miss him.'

'Yes, I shall have to take to business habits, to manage the property myself. I never could trust a stranger as I have trusted Dane. I knew he was incorruptible—rectitude itself in money matters. He is a man of few wants and no extravagances. Yes, he is a loss—but he must go. It is best so.'

'He is not happy with us?'

'Evidently not, since he wishes to go.'

'It was his wish to leave us?'

'Yes, his and mine too. He gave me reasons which I could not gainsay. I have no right to consider my own interest before everything; useful as he has been to me I must school myself to do without him. I am afraid your estate will have

a bad manager, Belle, but I shall do my best. I think, perhaps, if you were to help me a little—you have a clearer head than I have, and you know something of Dane's system—'

'Yes, he has told me a good deal,' answered Isabel eagerly. 'Why should we not manage our estate? When is Mr. Dane to go?'

'Early next week. He is going to put everything in order—to explain all his papers—and to give me all the help he can for carrying on everything upon his own plan. He has been very useful to us. We were getting poor before he came. We have been getting rich since he took our affairs in hand.'

'And I have been ever so much happier, Geoffrey,' answered Isabel, with her hand on her husband's shoulder.

She was secretly rejoiced at Dane's decision, now that the first faint thrill of fear was over. It was as if a tremendous weight had been lifted off her mind. Of late she had dreaded every meeting with the pale, earnest-eyed steward. The chief study of her life had been to avoid him without seeming to do so.

Mr. Dane did not appear that evening; he dined in his own room, and worked late after dinner. Four o'clock was the aristocratic dinner-hour in those days, and winter evenings were long. Isabel opened her harpsichord for the first time for some months, and began a light, airy Gigue of Handel's. Jasper Dane heard the gay bright music from his room above, and his face flushed angrily at the sound. It seemed to him like a little gush of joy at his announced departure. As if her heart were rejoicing in a sense of recovered freedom.

'No doubt I have been an incubus. She has seen and understood,' he said to himself.

On the next day and the next Mr. Dane was hard at work, arranging papers and going over accounts, setting his house in order before leaving it. Geoffrey spent some hours of each day in his friend's room, receiving his instructions, learning how he had managed household expenses, repairs, out-of-door servants, stable, and garden. Nothing had been too insignificant for his stewardship. Rectitude and plain-dealing were shown in every detail of his management.

The third day was Sunday, Jasper Dane's last day at Boscobel Abbey. He was to leave by the London coach, at seven o'clock next morning.

Boscobel, never remarkable for stir or haste in its streets, a place indeed which always seemed half asleep, save when mildly revived by market-day, wore its Sabbath solemnity

with a difference. There were more people in the streets; people in Sunday clothes, going to or coming from the old Gothic church; boys in sleek broad-cloth, without the least idea of what to do with their Sabbath leisure, and yawningly longing for dinner or supper time. Bells clashed out at intervals upon the dim autumn stillness, with unnecessary vehemence; perhaps in remonstrance with the dissenters, who preferred chapel even without bells.

Unless a man had a full mind, or a love of nature deep enough to find enchantment in the calm beauty of woodland, hill, and river, Sunday at Boscobel was passing dreary. Geoffrey Trevannion was apt to feel the Sabbath hours hang heavily, even in the company of a beloved wife. He went to church once at least, as in duty bound, and he, Isabel, and Mr. Dane made a triangle of worshippers in the large square pew, where the green baize cushions had been slowly fading for the last half century, to a dull gray.

The three knelt together this day for the last time, and it seemed as if the thought that it was so made them paler and graver than usual. They dined together after church, and spent the evening together in the spacious panelled drawing-room, with its lofty open fire-place and glorious pile of logs, burning out the dampness and chillness of those creeping November mists which wrapped all the outside world in a dim veil.

Mrs. Trevannion had been brought up in habits of simple piety, and to her Sunday evening was not as other evenings. She liked to read some religious book aloud to her husband —a sermon of Jeremy Taylor's, a chapter of Law's "Serious Call" to which Geoffrey listened with sleepy submissiveness. Then, by way of reward, she would play Handel's sacred airs, with tender, delicate touch, on her harpsichord.

This was the first Sunday evening which Dane had spent in the drawing-room for a long time. He listened to the sermon with his earnest eyes fixed on the reader in gravest contemplation, as if he were hearing something more than the sermon—as if he were listening to the Book of Fate. He hung over the harpsichord like a man entranced.

'When shall I ever hear such melody again?' he said, with a half-cynical air; 'not unless I get to Heaven, I suppose."

'You are going to London,' said Isabel, 'where you will have the Oratorios and the King's Theatre.'

'It will not be such music as this. Besides, I am not going to stay in London. I shall volunteer to join the army in America.'

Neither Mr. Trevannion nor his wife questioned the wisdom of such an act. Geoffrey sat staring idly at the fire. Isabel touched the keys of her harpsichord silently, deep in thought.

Presently the Abbey clock chimed the half-hour after nine, and the servants came filing in to family prayer. It was Isabel's duty to read the prayers as well as the sermon. She read them to-night in a firm, clear voice, and there was a fervour in her tone as of one relieved from trouble. The short Psalm which she read after prayers was one of thanksgiving.

'She has a heart of stone!' Jasper Dane said to himself. 'If it were flesh and blood it would bleed for me.'

When these devotions were finished, he came over to her, and held out his hand.

'Good-night and good-bye, Mrs. Trevannion; I shall have left before you come down to breakfast.'

'Good-night and good-bye,' she answered, looking straight before her, and letting her cold white fingers lie in his hand for an instant.

'Marble!—a mere piece of human marble!' he said to himself, as he turned away from her.

'I suppose I shall see you, Geoffrey?'

'Yes, I shall be astir before seven.'

And then all the house went to bed, and there was darkness throughout the Abbey, save for a night-lamp burning dimly in Mrs. Trevannion's bedchamber, a large tapestried room looking towards the Abbey church and the green hills behind.

The Abbey lay wrapped in its veil of river and meadow fog, and even that small light was hidden.

PART II.

THERE was horror in Boscobel, such as had not been known within the memory of living man, when the alarm-bell of the Abbey rung shrill in the early gray of the November morning, and men were told that Squire Trevannion had been found stabbed through the heart at the foot of his own staircase. The Abbey, guarded as few houses are guarded, by barred shutters and massive bolts, had been broken into by thieves; a pane of glass had been smashed in a narrow window in the hall, a piece cut out of the heavy shutter inside, and the bar removed. It was so narrow a window that the person entering by it must have been of slim figure—a mere slip of a boy, the constable conjectured; but a boy old enough and skilful enough to unlock and unbar the great house door without alarming the household, and to admit his confederates.

The glass cupboard in the hall had been emptied of its racing cups and jewelled-hilted swords. It was with one of these dainty court rapiers that Geoffrey Trevannion had been stabbed to death. The slim triangular blade was snapped short, near the hilt, and the chased silver hilt was missing. The thieves had begun their attack upon the plate-room. That was clear enough from the traces of their chisels on the iron-lined door; but before they could get the door open—it was in a passage behind the hall—they had been interrupted in their work by Geoffrey Trevannion, who had heard footsteps below, and had come downstairs to investigate.

One of the ruffians had been watching in the hall, while the others attacked the plate-room, and this man had stabbed Geoffrey before he could give the alarm to his household.

Mrs. Trevannion had not heard her husband leave the room, but waking a little before daybreak, she had taken alarm at his absence, and had rung her bell, and roused the household; and the servant, going to open the hall shutters, found a window open, and his master lying at the foot of the stairs in a pool of blood.

Of course a great deal of this history rested on conjecture —on the constable's acumen in putting links together, and making them into a chain. There was the violated window;

there were the marks on the strong-room door: there was the empty cupboard, which had held not only the racing-cups, but half-a-dozen tankards, from Cromwell to Queen Anne, which would now be worth their weight in gold. There was the broken sword, There were traces of muddy boots on the black and white marble pavement of the hall, and there were confused marks of footsteps on the gravel outside, as if two or three men and passed in and out ofthe hall door. It was all plain enough in the constable's mind; he had never known a clearer story.

'We'll have the Hue-and-cry out before to-night!' he said. 'Madam will offer a reward, I suppose?' he inquired of Mr. Dane, who stood grave and self-possessed amidst the frightened servants.

He had been interrupted in his final preparations for his journey by Mrs. Trevannion's bell, and had been one of the first to come down to the hall when the horrified footman gave the alarm.

'She will do all that is right. I believe she would give half her fortune to discover the murderer. Poor lady, it is dreadful to think of her grief. She worshipped her husband.'

'Yes, we all know that,' answered the constable, who was an old inhabitant. 'He was a fine English gentleman, a thorough sportsman, and everybody in Boscobel respected him. Folks didn't take to him just at first you see. It took time. He was a stranger, and hadn't no property of his own; and we didn't none of us think him good enough for Miss Trevannion; but he turned out the right stamp. He was true metal, kep' a good table, and a good stable, and spent his money in the town. That's what *I* call a gentleman! It's a great loss!'

The constable sighed, and thought it was time for him to get something in the way of refreshment. Mr. Dane was too preoccupied to think of such details, but the housekeeper would no doubt attend to the necessities of the hour; even though her master's corpse had just been carried up yonder staircase to the noble old tapestried bedchamber, where Solomon and the Queen of Sheba had looked down on his placid slumbers, and were now to see him lying stark under the linen sheet. While Jasper Dane stood in the open doorway, lost in thought, Mr. Truepenny, the constable, quietly retired to the servants' hall, feeling assured that Mrs. Baker, the housekeeper, would know what was right to be done in a liberal household, even under the present distressing circumstances.

Isabel Trevannion lay on a sofa in her dressing-room, next the tapestried chamber, shut in with her mighty grief—such a sorrow, it seemed to her, as no other woman had ever been called upon to bear. Her husband foully murdered in the full flush and vigour of manhood, slumbering peacefully by her side a few hours ago, now sleeping in death's icy sleep upon the same marriage-bed. Sudden death must always be awful, but could any death be so awful as this—so pitiful—so unnecessary—not the work of Providence, but the wickedness of men; ignorant, brutal men, greedy only for gain; having no grudge against their victim; no injury to avenge; only the professional criminal's reckless indifference to human life or human misery.

'I would have given them all my fortune; would have gone out of this house penniless, if they would but have spared him.'

Her grief had to be borne, and borne alone, and in darkness. She would see no one—not even the faithful Abigail who had once been her nurse, and who idolized her—not even Jasper Dane, who sent from time to time to ascertain her commands as the desolate days went by, under gray clouds, or shrouded in their dim autumnal mists, and the dreary ceremonials attending such a death had to be gone through—the inquest—the inquiry before the magistrates—the funeral. All had to be attended to; and Jasper Dane was on the spot, cool, collected, a thorough man of business, ready to answer every question. Of his sincere sorrow for his friend's untimely fate no one could doubt. It was obvious in his every look and word, but he made no parade of his feelings. He had postponed his journey to London for a short time only, and had transferred himself and his belongings to the Duke's Head, the chief inn at Boscobel, a quiet, reputable hostelry.

'I shall stay here as long as I can be of use to Mrs. Trevannion,' he told the Vicar; 'but I mean to fight the Provincials.'

There was a strong feeling—a thorough-going Tory feeling, the King and Lord North for ever—about the American war at Boscobel, and the Vicar was quite ready to sympathize with Mr. Dane in his desire to take up arms again for King George. Everybody in the town knew that he had fought the blacks, under Clive, and had won some distinction in an outlandish, far-away world. He had contrived to make himself respected in the place. There had been no meanness in his administration of his friend's affairs, careful as it had been. He had so carried himself in his somewhat delicate

position as to win every man's good word. And now it seemed only natural that the thirst for military glory should revive in him, and that he should want to cross the Atlantic.

He attended Geoffrey Trevannion's funeral, he waited till all inquiries as to his friend's death had terminated. The "Hue-and-Cry" had availed nothing—the police of that day had been able to find no trace of the murderer, or of the missing property. It seemed as if the burglary at Boscobel Abbey were doomed to swell the record of undiscovered crimes. Racing-cups and tankards had been melted down, no doubt. The thieves had gone their ways on the evil road to crime, indifferent as to the honest man's blood that they had shed and the loving woman's heart that they had broken.

Before he left the little west-country town, Jasper Dane begged for an interview with Mrs. Trevannion; but she refused to see him, albeit Sarah Dodd, her faithful waiting-woman, pleaded for him earnestly.

'He looks so pale and unhappy, madam,' she said, 'and I think it would be a comfort to you to talk about poor master to one that loved him as Mr. Dane did.'

'Nothing can give me any comfort—no one. Not even God, who sees and knows my misery!' answered Isabel, and in her white rigid face Sarah saw no sign of relenting.

'It seems hard for him to go away without bidding you good-bye,'—she said, persistently, not so much because she cared for Mr. Dane's feelings, as that she thought it would be good to rouse her mistress out of this dull stupor of grief —'after being like one of the family for nearly four years, and he going to America, too, to be shot, I daresay, like so many of our brave soldiers.'

But Isabel Trevannion never lifted her eyes from that spot upon the carpet where their dull gaze rested. For her it seemed as if the world had held only one man, and he was dead. What to her was the war in America—spies hanged on either side—garrisons massacred—victories—defeats. It was of no more account to her than a war in the planet Mars. Her husband, her first and only love, was murdered. She sat staring at the carpet, and thinking of the county ball where she first met Geoffrey Wyatt, where they had been partners in three country dances, and were deep in love with each other before the night was done.

Sarah Dodd went downstairs to Mr. Dane with a point-blank refusal. 'It ain't no use, she won't see no one,' she said; throwing in superfluous negatives for the sake of emphasis.

'Did she send me no message—no kindly word?' asked Jasper, lingering on the threshold of the now cheerless house.

'Lord, no, sir; she sits all day like a statter—she hasn't a word for any of us.'

Mr. Dane gave Sarah a guinea, and turned his back upon the Abbey. His trunks and portmanteaux were at the 'Duke's Head' ready for the coach. He was gone before breakfast-time next morning; and before the week was ended Boscobel was beginning to forget him.

It was a surprise for the town when his name appeared during the following year in the newspapers, and when, as the next year, and the next went by, the grave, quiet gentleman who had done a steward's work at Boscobel Abbey, was praised for the display of distinguished valour during the changing fortunes of that terrible war which now challenged the attention of Europe.

It was two years and a half since the burglary at Boscobel Abbey, and the struggle on the other side of the Atlantic was still raging fiercely, when Isabel Trevannion sat on the terrace in front of the drawing-room windows, with her dogs grouped round her in the clear evening light, very much as she had been seated years ago, when Jasper Dane came to the Abbey—except that the husband, who sat beside her then, could never be her companion again on this side of Eternity. *His* dog fawned at her knee, Duke, his favourite pointer, which she loved better than all her favourites—for the dead man's sake. But human companion she had none. She sat alone, her fair face shaded and chastened by a look of settled sorrow.

The Church and Abbey clocks were striking the half-hour after eight, the light was mellowing behind the broad boughs of the cedars on the lawn, twilight shadows were creeping up amidst the foliage of the shrubbery, and the colours of the flowers took a deeper glow as the sunset-hues brightened in the low western sky. Mrs. Trevannion closed the volume on her lap, and sat in a reverie, looking dreamily towards the sinking sun. She had never left the Abbey since her husband's death. Many women would have fled from the house, as from an accursed place, would have put the ocean between them and the scene of such terrible memories; but Isabel hugged her grief and brooded upon it. She turned a deaf ear to the pleading of those friends who tried to tempt her to their houses. 'I like to be near him,' she answered quietly. 'If his tomb were big enough, I would like to live in it. I stay as near him as I can.' Her eyes wandered

towards the churchyard, which adjoined the Abbey gardens. She could see her husband's tomb from her favourite seat on the terrace. The Abbey and the Abbey church had originally been one institution.

Little by little Mrs. Trevannion's friends had reconciled themselves to her seclusion, and had come to regard the Abbey as the tomb of the living. They called on her occasionally, but such visits were far from festive. The pale, beautiful woman, in deepest sables, exercised a depressing influence on her guests. It was, perhaps, kinder to leave her alone.

To-night her thoughts wandered to Jasper Dane, as they had often done lately, in consequence of the mention of his name in the American news. It was on just such an evening —a sweet, peaceful summer evening—that he had first come to the Abbey. The only difference was that her cup then brimmed over with joy, as it now overflowed with sorrow. While this thought was in her mind, she looked up and saw Jasper Dane coming slowly along the gravel-walk; the white, wan ghost of his former self.

Had she loved him, or had she been superstitious, she might have taken that shrunken figure for a very ghost. As it was she had no such thought. She saw the change, and, in a world from which all she loved had perished, it seemed to her only natural that another should be so changed. He was worn to a shadow, and his empty coat-sleeve was fastened to his breast. His right arm had been amputated.

She rose and gave him her hand, forgetful of everything in the past, save that he had been her husband's friend.

'I am going a little further west—to the Cornish moors,' he said, 'and I could not pass so near Boscobel without asking to see you.'

'I am sorry to see you looking so ill,' she answered, as they sat down on each side of the table, which held a tea-tray and a pile of books.

The Blenheim spaniel, which had always been a favourite of Mr. Dane's, received him with evident recognition; but Geoffrey's pointer slunk away, and did wonderful things with his spine, in the endeavour to creep under Mrs. Trevannion's armchair, from which shelter he shot baleful glances at the visitor from topaz-coloured eyes.

'I have been a little unlucky,' Jasper answered carelessly. 'I got my arm shot off in our last skirmish, and I had fever pretty badly afterwards—symptomatic fever, I think the doctors called it. They stowed me on board ship as soon as

they could. There are no more cats wanted yonder than can catch mice, and my mice-catching days seemed to be over.'

'That was very ungrateful of them, after you had fought so bravely,' answered Isabel gently. 'Did you like being over there?'

'Very much. It has been a glorious time; though there have been hideous mistakes on our part. The fighting has tested the metal of our fellows, and they have given the true ring. I wish I could have held on to the end. You have been—fairly well—I hope, since I left?'

'Oh, yes, I am well enough,' she answered, with a little bitter laugh. 'I have what the doctors call a wonderful constitution. I believe if you were to cut my head off I should go on living;' and then she fixed her eyes upon him earnestly, and said, 'The murderer has not been found yet.'

'No, I know. I have watched the English papers. I fear he will never be found.'

'Oh, yes, he will!' Mrs. Trevannion answered confidently. 'God would not let such a crime as that remain for ever unavenged.'

'The criminal will be punished in the next world, no doubt.'

'And in this,' she answered doggedly. 'I am sure of it. What had my husband done that he should die such a death—he who was so kind, so generous, who had never injured a living creature, who had not an enemy? Is such a life to be taken, and shall there be no redress in this world as well as in the next? I should cease to believe in the all-seeing eye of Heaven, if God's judgment failed to overtake such a crime. It may be slow, but it will come. God tries our faith. For a little while the wicked seem to rejoice in their iniquity: but judgment *will* come.'

'If this idea is a consolation to you——' Jasper began gently, as though he were talking to a child, whose delusions he did not care to dispel.

'It is. It is my only consolation.'

After this he tried to withdraw her mind from this agonizing theme by talking to her about the neighbourhood, her tenantry, the changes that had taken place in his absence. He stayed with her for an hour; first on the terrace, then, as it grew darker, in the candle-lit drawing-room; and when he left her to go back to the Duke's Head, where he was to stay that night, she felt just a little cheered by his visit. A friend had come back to her out of the past—her husband's friend.

Mr. Dane stayed all the next day at Boscobel. He called on the Vicar, and that gentleman, who had always liked

him, welcomed him cordially, and was delighted to hear all about his American experiences. The war was the absorbing topic of the day, and here was a man who could tell more about it than all the newspapers put together. Mr. Ponsford, the Vicar, would not hear of Jasper Dane's going to the Cornish moors. Not yet awhile, at any rate. He must stay at the Vicarage, and fish in Boscobel river—nothing better than a little quiet angling for a man out of health.

'You will get plenty of air from the hills,' said Mr. Ponsford; 'the Cornish moors would be too bleak for you.'

An invitation so heartily given could hardly be refused.

'I shall be delighted to stay,' said Jasper. 'Your society will put me in good spirits, and I am very fond of Boscobel.'

So Jasper stayed, and fished as well as he could with his single arm, and recovered his health rapidly in that sweet, pure air, the salt breath of the distant sea sweeping over moorland and valley. The river went through the Abbey grounds, and, loitering there with rod and line on the drowsy summer afternoons, Mr. Dane had frequent opportunities for conversation with Mrs. Trevannion. She never went beyond her own gardens, except to go to church, but she spent a great part of her life in those shady old grounds, with her books, her sketching-board, and her dogs. She took no pains to avoid Jasper Dane now. The past, as regarded his feelings for her, was to her mind a dead past. She liked to talk to him because he had been Geoffrey's friend; he could tell her of her husband's youth; that adventurous time in India, when they had both served under Clive. So long as he spoke of Geoffrey she was interested; but Dane saw that his own adventures, all the toil and glory of this late war, had not a spark of interest for her.

Mr. Dane stayed more than a month at the Vicarage, and the benefit he had derived from the Boscobel climate was so great that he determined upon spending the winter in the neighbourhood. He found a decent lodging in a pastoral village about three miles from the town, a mere cluster of cottages on the slope of a heather-clad hill; and here he lived for the next year, walking or riding into Boscobel daily, and resuming the management of Mrs. Trevannion's estate.

Just a year after his return the end came, which almost everybody except Geoffrey's widow had foreseen. Mrs. Trevannion consented to marry Mr. Dane, and they were united

by Jasper's good friend, the Vicar, in the same church which had seen Geoffrey's coffin under its velvet pall, borne by the best gentlemen in the neighbourhood.

She did not profess any love for him, but she was grateful for his devotion; she liked him because he had liked her husband, and she furnished one more example of the way in which any woman may be won if her lover will only persevere in his courtship.

Except by Mr. Ponsford, and by a few of the tradespeople, the marriage did not find favour in the sight of Boscobel. The town had objected in the first instance to Geoffrey Wyatt, as an alien adventurer; but once having adopted him, the town objected still more strongly to a second husband, in the person of Jasper Dane. It was affirmed that Mrs. Trevannion would live to repent her folly.

Life went on very smoothly at the Abbey, in spite of adverse opinion in the town. If Mrs. Dane—the good old name had been renounced at last—were not happy, she was at least contented. She had in her second husband a man who could sympathize with her every taste, join in all her favourite pursuits—a man who was in all things her companion and guide. He was highly accomplished, and had an ardent appreciation of all that is most beautiful in life. There could not be a more refined home, or a better matched couple.

The few friends who visited at the Abbey were compelled to acknowledge this.

'Mr. Dane is undoubtedly a gentleman,' they said; 'a man of no family, but one of Nature's gentlemen, and he is thoroughly devoted to his wife.'

'He ought to be!' growled a bachelor, who would have liked to win such a woman. 'Mrs. Trevannion—I can't school my tongue to give her the fellow's name—is one of the handsomest women in Devonshire, and the Abbey estate is one of the best in the county.'

The outer world might believe him mercenary, but those who knew him intimately could see that the desire of worldly gain had little influenced Jasper Dane in his wooing. His habits were as simple as when he had been only Geoffrey's steward. He made little use of his wife's wealth, except to dispense it largely in charity. It was he who, in her name, established and endowed the hospital just outside Boscobel. Wherever there was sickness or want, help came from the Abbey. Mrs. Trevannion had always been liberal to those who appealed to her, but not actively and inquiringly beneficent, like her second husband. She co-operated

gladly in all his good works. Schools, cottages, church, all profited by her liberality.

'Why should we hoard our money?' said Jasper. 'We have no one to inherit it after us.'

This speech was spoken within two years of their marriage; but before the third year was out a child was born at the Abbey, and Isabel Trevannion, transfigured by the bliss of maternity, sat on the sunlit terrace with her infant son in her arms; but even in her delight in this new tie, her thoughts went back to her first husband.

'It seems hard that *he* never had a son!' she said to herself; and looking up at Jasper's grave face, she felt chilled by an image that kindled no warmth of womanly affection in her heart. He was her friend and companion; she respected and trusted him; but she had never loved him.

Jasper's delight in the birth of the boy was as intense as the mother's. He worshipped the child; and, as years went on, Trevannion—for the good old name was revived again in the boy, who was christened Trevannion, and was to take the name of Trevannion after Dane, when he came of age, thus becoming Trevannion Dane Trevannion—became the ruler of the Abbey. Father and mother concurred in spoiling him; old servants bowed down to him; his will was law. He was not a bad fellow, but impetuous and self-willed, sorely needing a control which was never exercised. Neither his father nor his mother could bear to deny him anything—to oppose any whim of his, however foolish. As he grew from childhood to boyhood he had all a country-bred boy's tastes, fishing, shooting, riding, birds'-nesting, otter-hunting; no inclination towards study, which was a disappointment to the father; no love of art, which was a source of regret for the mother. He was beautiful, exceedingly; but as the young of the animal creation are beautiful, by reason of his activity and vigour, his lissome limbs, his sleekness and brilliant colour.

He was ten years old when his father fell ill of a lingering, wasting malady, which made him forsake his study—the familiar desk at which he had carried on all his steward's business—and confined him to his room. He had never slept in King Solomon's room—the tapestried bedchamber, where his friend's murdered corpse had been laid. He occupied a panelled bedroom looking into the garden and adjoining his study. King Solomon's room had been shut up ever since the murder. The housekeeper went in from time to time, the room was aired and cleaned, but the door was kept locked.

Lying on that which he felt to be his death-bed, Jasper Dane's sole delight was in the company of his wife and boy. She was with him almost always; waiting upon him, reading to him, comforting him; but the boy came fluttering in and out, like a bird or a butterfly—a bright, restless creature, fickle and untameable.

'It is so dull here,' he complained once, when his father coaxed him to remain. 'You look so grave, and mamma too. There is no fun; nothing for me to do. I want to ride my pony over the hills.'

'True, my boy, it is very dull for you, dull for mamma too. Go and have your scamper over the hills, but come and see me afterwards. It does me good to see you.'

'Oh, yes, I'll come, and tell you all about Robin Goodfellow,' answered the boy, kissing his hand as he ran off. The Robin in question was his pony.

It was the end of November, that dismal month in which Geoffrey Trevannion had met his fate. Jasper had been an invalid since the early summer. The doctors gave little hope of his recovery. It was a kind of atrophy. The mind was bright and clear enough, except in the night sometimes, when his wits wandered a little with low fever—but the body was slowly withering.

'That fever in America,' said the doctor, shaking his head, 'the hardships he suffered during the war.'

Those were painful nights of watching for Isabel, when her husband's mind was far astray, and he rambled horribly in his talk, now fancying himself in Bengal, now at Lexington, at Bunker's Hill, at Charleston, now muttering to himself vaguely, in a disconnected way, strange fragments of speech, accusing himself of monstrous wickedness, 'steeped to the lips in guilt,—a soul drowned in the blackest depths of sin.' It was all mere fever, the natural consequence of extreme debility and light-headedness. He was clear and calm enough in the day, when he was able to sit up in his bed, supported by a pile of pillows, and to take the stimulants that sustained the feeble flame of life.

Christmas was drawing near. The boys and girls at the Vicarage were preparing some kind of mediæval mummery, some dressing up and fooling, and Trevannion was to have his share in it. He was full of delight in the sport, delicious to him in its novelty.

'I am to be St. George and the dragon—no, Arthur is to be the dragon, with a red coat all over scales—gilt paper scales, mamma—Rhoda is making them. And I am to have a helmet and feathers. Please find me some feathers. And

we want a lot of grand clothes, for Justice, and Britannia, and Queen Elizabeth, and Old Father Christmas. Rhoda says you must have all kinds of grand things put away in chests and wardrobes, and that you can lend them to us.'

Mrs. Dane was not unwilling to be useful in the matter, but she was very anxious about her husband, whose faint hold upon life seemed growing weaker daily, and she put off compliance with her boy's reiterated request. Now to be put off about anything which he has set his heart upon is just what a spoilt child cannot endure. Trevannion made up his mind to hunt the chests and closets on his own account. The things would all be his own property by and-by, the servants had told him so. He set out upon a voyage of discovery, ransacked closets, turned over the contents of coffers, dragged into the light of day a good many fine gowns and mantuas of a long-forgotten fashion. There was one closet which he explored last of all, the roomy receptacle in his father's study. It was locked, but there is no creature so determined as a child who has always had his own way. Among the numerous gifts which his parents had lavished upon him was a super-excellent box of carpenter's tools. With the help of these instruments Master Trevannion Dane contrived to shoot back the lock of the door, a clumsy old lock at best, ponderous but futile.

The investigation of that one closet occupied an afternoon. There were stacks of old books and papers in the foreground, so piled as to wall in the back of the closet. All these had to be taken down before Trevannion came to anything interesting. Behind the books, however, he found an old trunk, a capacious old trunk, that was damp to the touch and smelt of sea-water. This box, like the closet, was locked, but Trevannion and his chisel prevailed, and after tremendous efforts he raised the lid; on the top of the trunk there were old clothes, coats, and overcoats neatly folded; and under these the boy found a dozen or more tarnished silver cups and tankards, some of them gilded inside, three or four jewelled swords, and a silver hilt, broken short off.

The brief winter day was fading by the time he made this discovery. Here was treasure-trove. He felt himself a benefactor to his family, and rushed off to his mother, panting and triumphant.

She was just lighting a candle at a table by the fire-place in her husband's bedchamber, while Jasper lay dozing behind the heavy damask curtains, when her son ran in and took hold of her gown.

'Come, mamma, come!' he said: 'I have found such lovely things in papa's closet. Silver jugs, so big'—opening his arms to express grandeur of size—'and swords. I may have one for St. George, may I not? St. George must have a sword. Rhoda made me a card-board one—but I'd rather have one of these.'

'Silver cups?' she repeated curiously. 'You are dreaming.'

'Come and see—come and see,' he cried; 'aren't you glad I found them? I may have one for my very own, mayn't I?'

She took up the candle and went with him—feeling as if she were moving in some horrible dream.

He led her to the closet, and showed her the open trunk—an old sea-chest that had been to India and back—she remembered its being brought to the Abbey for Jasper Dane, after he had established himself there.

She stood with the candle in her hand looking down at her dead husband's racing-cups—the old tankards—the jewelled swords—all the contents of the glass cupboard in the hall. And there amongst them lay the rapier hilt, in chased silver—splashed with blood—a stain which time had blackened.

'Trevannion,' she said solemnly, with her hand on the boy's shoulder, 'you must never speak of these things. No one must know.'

'But why not?'

'Never mind why,' she answered, almost fiercely. 'You must obey me.'

'But mayn't I have one of those silver things?'

'Not till I am dead and gone. You may have them all then.'

'I don't want them then. I don't want you to be dead. I want one of the swords, and one of the silver mugs, now.'

'Trevannion, you *must* obey me. You *must not* say a word about these things. Do you understand?'

'Yes, mamma,' he faltered, awed by the authority of her tone, which was new to him.

'And now go to Sarah, and do not come to me any more to-night. Your father is very ill.'

She dismissed him with a hurried kiss, and went back to the sick-room, where she sat looking into the fire.

She understood it all now. The supposed burglary was a sham—an artfully contrived pretence. He had done it—he who was lying there—who had been her husband for thirteen years—to whom she had given duty and respect, whom her

acts had honoured and her lips had praised. He, the father of her boy.

He was dying. She knew that the sands were running out in the glass of life. There could be no redress.

'I never loved him,' she said to herself; 'thank God, I never loved him.'

She softly drew back the heavy curtain and looked down at the sick man meditatively—white to the lips, but with a fierce light in her dark-blue eyes. He was sleeping, but only by fits and snatches, and she wanted him to slumber soundly. She had a plan to carry out.

She looked among the bottles on a table by the bed, and selected one which contained a sedative; a dose of which was to be given him at night, if he were too restless.

'This will do it, perhaps,' she thought, and she poured out a double dose.

When next he stirred and turned upon his pillow, she put the glass to his lips, and, accustomed to be given medicine and restoratives, he swallowed the mixture submissively, she looking down at him with those terrible eyes.

An hour later, when he was sleeping profoundly, she had him carried to the tapestried room, where her first husband's corpse had been laid. He was lifted from his own bed on a mattress, and laid on that fatal couch, she telling the servants who did it that the change to the larger room was necessary to give him more air.

A fire had been lighted at her bidding, and the room had been always kept aired. There was no absolute cruelty in the change; but the servants wondered a good deal at the proceeding. It seemed hazardous, to say the least of it.

'You may depend the doctor ordered it, or my lady wouldn't have had it done,' said Sarah, who would have thrust her right arm into a furnace at her lady's bidding.

Mrs. Trevannion sat by the fire in King Solomon's chamber all night, hardly withdrawing her eyes from the sleeper on the old four-post bed, with its twisted and elaborately carved pillars and cornice, its gloomy draperies, and faded crimson plumes. Jasper slept till close upon daybreak—the cold, cheerless winter dawn, the uncanny light in which Geoffrey Trevannion's murder had been discovered. It was at this very hour the sick man's mind was always clearest. He woke and saw his wife standing at the bottom of the bed, leaning against one of the carved pillars, looking down at him.

'What a terrible long night it has been,' he said. 'I have had dreadful dreams.'

'Jasper Dane,' she said, 'I have some news for you. The murderer has been found!'

'What?'

'Do you remember when you came back from America—do you remember that summer evening on the terrace—when *his* dog shrunk away from you? I told you that Geoffrey's murderer would be discovered. I was sure of it. Providence would not have it otherwise. I was right, you see.'

He lay looking at her, feebly wiping the dampness from his brow, waiting to know the worst.

'The murderer is found, and you are he,' she said; 'the falsest friend—the vilest hypocrite, the cruellest villain who ever crawled this earth.'

'No,' he answered faintly; 'I was neither false friend, nor hypocrite. My one sin was loving you. I fought against my passion—yes, I fought a good fight. I made up my mind to go—anywhere out of reach of you—to fling away my life for your sake. When I told Geoffrey that I must go he suspected me—that day we took the long ride together—I knew it more by his manner than by what he said. He was too willing that I should leave the Abbey. My face or my speech had betrayed me. No wonder, when my very soul was steeped in love for you. To the last I meant to deal honourably with my friend—yes, to the very last—till that last night, when sleepless in my misery, I crept downstairs, and walked about the hall, and opened the window to let in the cold morning air—and, pacing up and down in this distracted state, took a rapier from the wall, and had half a mind to kill myself, when I turned and saw Geoffrey at the foot of the stairs, and the devil took possession of me that instant and prompted me to stab him. One swift, unerring thrust plunged my soul for ever in the pit of hell. My next thought was how to profit by my crime—to keep my name clear and to win you. For this I planned things so that it should seem that the house had been robbed. I had just time enough to do what was needful before your bell rang and alarmed the house—just time enough to get back to my room after the ringing of your bell. I wish to Heaven I had been killed in America. And yet—I have been your husband—life has had its sweetness.'

'I wish I had found you out soon enough to have you hanged,' she said mercilessly. 'You are dying. You will cheat the gallows and me. Do you see where you are?' she asked, plucking back the nearest window-curtain, and letting in a flood of morning light. 'You are in his room. This is

the bed on which your victim lay. Die upon it, and hope for God's mercy if you can.'

These were the last words she spoke to him. She left him to her servants, who watched him and ministered to him faithfully to the end.

He died that night, and his wife followed him to the grave within a few weeks. She hardly spoke or looked up after his death. It was a touching instance of death from a broken heart.

'You see she cared for her second husband ever so much better than she did for her first,' said every one in Boscobel.

Trevannion Dane Trevannion grew up a fine specimen of dauntless, muscular humanity, won for himself considerable renown as a dashing soldier in the Peninsular war, and lived to be the father of many Trevannions.

THOU ART THE MAN.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE BOARDS.

Sixty years ago, two years after the battle of Waterloo had wound up the fortunes of the long war, and sent Napoleon to his rocky cage amidst the tropical seas, London was a different London from the metropolis of to-day, a city of narrower streets and more perilous alleys and by-ways, and yet a city with a certain homely comfort and snugness about it that seems to have been left behind in the march of improvement. When the century was young, London was something more than the brilliant focus of commercial enterprize. It was a city in which people lived and died. Wealthy traders were not ashamed to make their homes over their shops or their offices. Brides went forth from the narrow streets to be married in the gray old churches; children were carried to the old stone fonts; men and women worshipped in the tall pews, Sunday after Sunday. Now the stern hand of improvement is sweeping away the good old churches. Nobody wants them. Nobody lives in London.

In the London of sixty years ago, Charles Lamb's London, the Drama was a grand institution. Theatres were fewer, and ranked higher in men's minds. Every dramatic event was a great public question. An O.P. riot would be impossible now-a-days. Managers may raise or lower their prices as the humour moves them. Nobody cares. There are so many theatres that every man can find a place to suit his inclination and his pocket. People are as fond of the drama as ever, perhaps; but it is no longer a religion, a national pride. When this century was young, the play was almost

as much to the Londoner as the old riotous worship of Bacchus was to the Greek when the drama was new born.

Behold the wide circle of eager faces in great Drury Lane, every eye fixed on one man, who holds the audience spell-bound, watchful of his every look and every movement, breathless almost, lest a whisper of his should escape them. There is a silence as in the house of death, an oppressive dumbness, as he glides stealthily across the wide empty stage and plucks aside a curtain that veils the arched entrance to an inner chamber.

He is a small man, lithe, muscular, with closely knit frame. He has a long thin face, black eyes that glow like burning coals, long black hair which he tosses back from the high wide brow, the brow of a Cæsar, as he pauses for a moment with the curtain in his hand and looks towards his audience, but not at them.

It is an attitude to be remembered, that crouching movement, as of a tiger about to spring, the hand clutching the velvet curtain, the head thrust forward, serpent like, as if a forked sting were darting from those pale parted lips. Then with a sudden spring the man stands erect, tears back the curtain, and looks within.

What does he see? A man and woman sitting at a chess table, in a Venetian chamber. The blue waters of the Adriatic, the white pinnacles of distant buildings shine through the wide window in front of which they two are seated.

They have been playing, but are playing no more. It is all earnest now. The man leans across the table, the woman's hand clasped in his. He looks up into her fair young face with an impassioned gaze, which she returns, yielding and subjugated.

The man lets fall the velvet curtain, totters a few paces forward, and then with one long despairing cry, drops to the ground like a log.

The act ends with this picture. But that last hoarse cry of the actor dwells with his audience after the curtain has gone down. It was almost too awful for human suffering. It was like the agonized howl of a tortured animal. It was the extreme expression of passion and despair in an utterly savage nature.

The play had taken the town by storm, and the actor, who within the last two years had become suddenly famous, had won new laurels in the part; but it was a tragedy not destined to immortality, and has sunk into the night of oblivion with many of its kind.

But just now this Italian story of Love, Revenge and Murder, with Michael Elyard in the principal part, was the rage. The play drew crowded houses nightly, and Elyard was declared to have surpassed himself in the character of the Italian husband, a modern version of 'Othello,' without Othello's nobleness.

In the last act of the play the betrayed husband stabs his false wife in a garden at sunset, and hides the corpse among the rushes that fringe the canal. It was this scene of the murder which thrilled the audience, and sent them home rapturous and awestricken, to dream of Elyard's white face and burning eyes, the black elf locks falling over the pale forehead, the lithe compact form clad in close fitting black velvet.

To see him drag his victim from the fountain where he had slain her to the rushes that showed dark against the red light of the setting sun; to see him bend over the fair face, and in a sudden burst of passion, rain kisses upon the dead brow and cheeks; to see him lift the lifeless corpse upon his knee and try in a wild madness to charm it back to life, then fling it from him with a sudden yell of rage at the remembrance of its falsehood; and then to watch his convulsive movements, his furtive backward glances, the nervous quivering of his muscular limbs as he hid the dreadful thing among the rushes, while the sun sank lower and the red sky took an intenser red, till all the scene seemed steeped in blood; to see all this was to drink a cup of horror that gave a keener zest to the enjoyment of a convivial meeting and an oyster supper after the play.

To-night there are two men in a box near the stage, who watch the play with expression and bearing so opposite that the difference is something to be remarked. One leans with his arms folded upon the cushion of the box, his chin resting on his arms, and his eyes fixed intently on the scene. He loses not a movement nor a tone of the actors. The other lolls back in his chair, and surveys the stage through his eyeglass, attentive, discriminating, critical, but not entranced.

The first is Captain Bywater, of His Majesty's Navy, who has just come ashore after a cruise in the south seas, and has not seen a stage play for the last seven years. The second is Phillimore Dorrell, the famous criminal lawyer, who has seen this particular play five times.

The two men are old schoolfellows at the Charter House, and have been dining together at a snug city tavern, where the floor is sanded and the burgundy is genuine.

Not till the green curtain drops on a maddened suicide does Charles Bywater relax his gaze. Then he lifts his head, pulls himself together with a shiver, as if waking out of a bad dream, and looks absently round the house.

'Well, Charley, what do you think of Elyard in "The Venetian Husband." A capital piece of acting, isn't it?'

'Acting,' replied the other. 'It's not like acting. It's like reality.'

'Which all good acting must be.'

'Yes; but I have seen good acting before to-night, which was not like this. I could not have believed that any man could do such things as this man does unless he were at heart a murderer.'

'My dear fellow, that is to deny the possibility of consummate art. Your true artist imagines himself the being he represents. It is as easy for him to imagine himself a murderer, as to imagine himself a hero or a lover.'

'Yes, in a broad, abstract way. But this man goes into the littlenesses of crime, the finest details, the most minute particulars.'

'His imagination realizes these as readily as the broader outline. It is his wonderful appreciation of detail that makes his performance so masterly and so original. The fact is the man is a genius.'

'Do you know him?' asked the sailor, deeply interested.

'Almost as well as I know you. He goes into the best society. He was at Oxford; and is a man of considerable refinement. I supped with him the other night.'

'What!' exclaimed the Captain, 'you eat with him after seeing him in this play. Did not you feel as if you were sitting down with a murderer?'

'Not the least in the world. I felt that I was sitting down with a very agreeable acquaintance. A trifle self-conscious, as most actors are; and rather too fond of talking about his art, but a perfect gentleman, notwithstanding. We had a discussion, by-the-way, after supper, which was peculiarly interesting to me, as a man whose experience has made him unhappily familiar with the physiology of crime.'

'What about?'

'About murder. Elyard has an idea that a great many murders are committed in a century which never come to light, the secret of which dies and is buried with the victim of the crime. Now, I have just the opposite opinion. It is my fixed belief, founded upon long familiarity with the history of crime, that there is an inherent something in the crime of murder which makes its ultimate discovery inevitable.'

'Shakespeare has expressed the same opinion rather more tersely,' said Captain Bywater. 'Blood will have blood.'

'True,' assented Mr. Dorrell, vexed at being interrupted in his preamble, 'that's Shakespeare's rough and ready way of putting it. My theory is that from the moment a man becomes a criminal he becomes a blunderer. He is off the straight track, and is sure to take a wrong step. The murderer is playing the most desperate game a man can play, with all society on the other side. The odds against success are terrible. And then there is something in blood that stupefies a man. From the instant he stains his hands he begins to do idiotic things. He buries the body that he should have left unburied: or, he leaves it unburied when wisdom would have buried it. His crime has been hidden for a year or more, perhaps, and no finger has been pointed at him, when he takes it into his head all at once that his secret is in danger, and unearths his victim, and is caught with the ghastly proof of his crime in his arms. Or, when the deed is done, craven fear seizes hold of him, and he flies the scene of his guilt, and so betrays himself; or he keeps some shred or scrap of his victim's garments; or he overacts the part of innocence in some way. Sooner or later his distempered spirit will lead him to some act of besotted idiocy, by which the deed he has done will be made clear to men's eyes. He is never safe. Elyard seemed deeply interested in what I told him of my experience in the ways of criminals; but he was not convinced. He clings to the idea that there are murders which justice never hears of.'

The afterpiece began, and Phillimore Dorrell hurried off to a convivial supper party, leaving Captain Bywater alone in the box.

'You know my chambers, old fellow,' he said at parting, 'I shall be glad to see you whenever you can look in.'

'That will be pretty often, Phil, depend upon it,' answered the other, 'but I'm going down to the country for a week or so before I enjoy myself in London.'

'To see your people?' inquired Dorrell.

'My people are under the sod, Phil. I shall go and have a look at their graves; and I shall hunt up an old friend or two among the few that I knew in my boyhood.'

CHAPTER II.

LOVED AND LOST.

Captain Bywater started by coach early next morning. The scene of his birth was a quiet village among the Buckinghamshire hills, an out of the way rustic place, shut in and sheltered from cold winds and the biting breath of worldly men and women. A cluster of cottages, an old old church, with a low square tower, and a wonderful sun dial for its only ornament, two or three comfortable homesteads, a grange that had once been a grand mansion, and the good old red brick house still known as Squire Bywater's, though the squire had been laid in his grave years ago, and Charley had let the house to an alien family who were said to do nothing for the poor; an accusation which might be taken to mean that they stopped short of giving away the greater part of their substance and leaving themselves poorer than their pensioners, as the dead and gone squire had done.

It was a bright afternoon in May when the sailor alighted from the coach in front of the old inn, a cosy-looking low white house, with a golden sun for a sign, and bright red flower-pots in all the windows.

How pretty the dear old village looked in the afternoon sunshine.

What a blessed haven from the cares and struggles of the world, what a calm retreat, what an abode of innocence and peace. The gardens were all bright with blue forget-me-nots and yellow cowslips, roses just bursting into bloom. The last of the violets perfumed the air. The ruddy fire was glowing in the village forge. Hens were cackling, ducks quacking and splashing in the pond before the inn door. Rosy cheeked children looked up and grinned at the traveller, as at a being whose arrival was the next best thing to a peep show.

All this was rapture to the sailor who had been seven years at sea. He took in everything with the eager glance of his lively gray eyes, and then he turned away from the inn, and looked long and thoughtfully at the old stone mansion yonder, with its dull neglected air.

It was a good old Tudor house, standing back from the

road, a wide lawn in front of its mullioned windows, two mighty cedars casting their dense shadows on the sunlit grass, clipped yew hedges, straight walks, and a garden that looked barren and uncared for.

'Old Mr. Leeworthy is still living, I hope?' asked the Captain, turning to the inn-keeper, with a certain anxiety in his tone.

'Yes, sir, the old gentleman is still alive. He must be going on for ninety—a wonderful old man! There are very few like him now-a-days. I'm very glad to see you back, sir, after so long. I hope you are going to make a stay with us, now the war's over. Shall I have your portmanteau taken up stairs, sir?'

'Yes, I shall be here for a day or two.'

'John, take Captain Bywater's portmanteau to the blue room.'

Charles Bywater's gaze was still fixed on the old stone house on the opposite side of the village green.

'You've dined on the road, mayhap, sir!' said his host, 'and you'd like a comfortable bit of supper, or a dish of tea.'

'You can get me some supper at eight or nine o'clock, eggs and bacon—anything. I am going over to see old Mr. Leeworthy. His granddaughter is as pretty as ever I suppose?' he added, with an ill-assumed carelessness.

All through the journey from London—while the heavy old coach rolled along at a rate that seemed a snail's pace to Captain Bywater's impatience—one image had been shining before the eyes of the traveller, a fair girlish face, radiant with youthful bloom. It had been almost a child's face, when he withdrew his eyes from its fresh beauty, five years ago, after the long lingering gaze of farewell, a sweet face looking up at him in its artless grief, half drowned in tears. To have spoken of his love then would have seemed profanation. He kept his secret, and went away to sea, meaning to come back in a couple of years, or so, and plead his cause, fearing no rival in that unsophisticated village, and secure in the belief that Helen Leeworthy cared more for him than any one else in the world.

A troubled look came over the innkeeper's round face.

'Sure to goodness, Captain, you must have heard.'

'What? Is she married?'

'No, sir.'

'Dead!' gasped Captain Bywater, with an ashy face.

Oh, he ought to have feared this. Fate is so cruel. And beings as lovely as Helen Leeworthy are the flowers which fall earliest under death's sickle.

'No, sir, not dead—not that any one knows—but gone.'

'Gone! Where and how?'

'That's more than anybody has ever been able to find out, sir. It almost broke old Mr. Leeworthy's heart. He has never been the same man since. He just crawls about the place like the ghost of himself. It's pitiful to see him. His mind is gone. And everything is neglected—the garden—the house—nobody cares.'

'Tell me all—from first to last,' said Captain Bywater, putting his arm through the landlord's and leading him away from the inn door to the broad high road, where there was no one to overhear them. 'When did it happen? How? When did she go away? Begin at the beginning.'

'Well, sir, it was two years after you left us, and summer weather, as it might be now, only a good deal later in the year. Old Mr. Leeworthy's nephew, the politician, him as you've doubtless heard about taking a leading part in public affairs up in London, he was staying at the Grange when it happened, with his secretary. They'd been there above a month—nigh upon two months I should say, counting from the closing of Parliament, and Mr. Leeworthy—I mean Mr. Thomas Leeworthy, the nephew—was studying hard, and getting up—stat—stat—well I'm bothered.'

'Statistics,' exclaimed the Captain impatiently. 'For Heaven's sake go on. What does Mr. Leeworthy's book matter?'

'Well, it has a bearing on the case, you see, sir. All things have a bearing. Well, sir, to make a long story short, one fine September morning, when the leaves were just beginning to turn, Miss Leeworthy was missing. There was no letter—not a word—nothing—to tell anybody where she had gone, or why she had gone. There was nothing missing out of her room—not so much as a bonnet. But she was gone, and from that hour to this nobody in Clerevale has ever heard of her.'

'The secretary,' cried Captain Bywater. 'What of him? He was young, attractive, perhaps.'

'He was young,' asserted the landlord, 'but he wasn't attractive, least ways, not to me. I'd have gone a mile out of my way to avoid meeting him.'

'A lady may have thought differently,' said the Captain bitterly.

He saw in this young secretary the clue to the mystery. Lover's secrets closely kept, an elopement, first Gretna and then the King's Bench.

'Any how, Captain, the secretary could hardly have been at the bottom of it. He never budged. His master stopped

at the Grange till the end of the year, and he stopped with him. I used to meet him about the village, though I didn't want to it. A lonesome young man, shut up in his own self, as close as a church on work-a-days. I never liked the cut of his jib, as you naval gentlemen say.'

'Is that all you can tell me, Jarvis?'

'Every syllable.'

The Captain turned from him without a word, and walked quickly back to the village green, and across the green to the gates of the Grange. That gray and rigid face told of a grief too deep for utterance, a dumb despair deep enough to overshadow a life time.

As he drew near the broad iron gate, a sigh of agony broke from those white lips of his. Oh, Heaven, how well he remembered her. It was here, by this gate, they had parted. Could it be for ever? He could see the childish face, pure as a lily, the sweet sad eyes, brimming over with tears. And she was gone—perhaps to misery—it might be to shame. Oh, rather than that let it be death. In time, doubtless, he might come to think, with resignation, of her lying at rest in some quiet churchyard. But it was madness to think of her disgraced and dishonoured; that fair flower, which he had deemed almost too lovely for earth, trampled in the gutter, flung aside to wither, like the vilest weed. He went in at the open gate, along the grass grown walk to the low door where he had been used to enter. He rang a bell that sounded dismally, as in an empty house.

The old housekeeper opened the door. She curtseyed and smiled and seemed pleased to see him. It struck him all at once that he might learn more from her than from the master of the house. She was Mr. Leeworthy's junior by a good many years. Her memory would be clearer, and he could question her more freely.

'I have come to see your old master, Mrs. Dill; but I should like to have a few minutes' talk with you first. I've only just come home from sea, and I've heard something that has taken all the joy out of my return.

'I think I know what you mean, sir. You've heard about Miss Helen. She was always a favourite with you, wasn't she? You were like a playfellow with her, though you were so much older. She loved you like a brother.'

'And I loved her as I never have loved and never shall love any other woman,' answered the Captain. 'I tell you my secret, Mrs. Dill, because I want you to speak freely. I want you to help me to find her.'

'Find her,' sighed the housekeeper. 'Oh, sir, who can

hope for that, after five long years, and after Mr. Thomas Leeworthy doing all that could be done, and he a public man too, and so clever. Who could do more than he could?'

'Love, my good soul, true love, which is as strong as faith, and can move mountains. Mr. Thomas Leeworthy may have been a very affectionate uncle, but he never loved his niece as I love—yes, as I love her. Living or dead—lost or found—she is to me the dearest thing upon earth. And now tell me every circumstance of her disappearance—every suspicion—every conjecture.'

Captain Bywater had followed the housekeeper into a little room off the hall, a chilly disused parlour, where the very furniture had a phantasmal look, like a dream of the past.

'Lord bless your heart, sir, there is so little to tell. We went to her room one morning and found her gone—the bed had not been slept in—she must have gone over night.'

'Did she go to her room that night, at the usual hour? You are early people here, I know.'

'Well, sir, that's a thing that has never been quite clear to my mind. Miss Helen used to be fond of walking out alone those fine summer evenings, while her grandpapa and Mr. Thomas sat over their port. Both gentlemen are fond of a good glass of port, you know, sir. They dined at five, and they used to sit a long time, as late as nine o'clock sometimes—and then the old gentleman would go to bed, and Mr. Thomas would smoke his pipe on the lawn, all by himself, or with Mr. Elphinstone, his secretary, as it might happen. And Miss used always to go back to the dining-room after she came in from her walk. She'd go straight up to her room sometimes, and sit and read there before she went to bed. Now on the night before we lost her it happened that neither I nor the maid saw her go upstairs to her room. It was a lovely evening. I remember it particularly, because it was such a red sunset.'

Captain Bywater shivered. It was an idle thought to come into his mind at such a moment, but there flashed upon him that picture in the theatre last night. The body hidden among the rushes. The whole scene steeped in red light, like blood.

'No, sir, nobody saw her come indoors or go upstairs to her room that night, and if I was put upon my oath I couldn't say that she ever came back to the house after she left the two gentlemen sitting at their wine.'

'Where was this Mr. Elphinstone, the secretary, that night?'

'At his work in the study, copying and compiling for Mr. Thomas Leeworthy's book, so far as I know, sir.'

'So far as you know. That means that he may just as easily have been any where else.'

'I could take my oath as to where he was from nine to ten,' said the house-keeper, somewhat offended.

'How is that?'

'Because I saw him from my sitting-room window walking up and down the lawn with Mr. Thomas Leeworthy. It was moonlight, a lovely night after a lovely evening, and the two gentlemen were walking up and down talking for an hour. The clock struck ten as they came in to go to bed.'

'Mr. Elphinstone slept in the house that night?'

'Yes, sir, I'm certain of that. If you've got the notion that Mr. Elphinstone had any hand in Miss Helen's running away you're quite mistaken. If there was a lover at the bottom of it, as some folks say, it must have been some other lover. I'll take my oath it wasn't Mr. Elphinstone.'

'Why are you so certain?'

'Because she hated him.'

'How do you know that?'

'I could see it in all her ways. Perhaps hatred is too harsh a word to use about any one so gentle as Miss Helen. She could hardly have hated any one if she had tried ever so. But I've seen her shrink from him, and avoid him in a way that was almost cruel. I've seen him stung by it, too, though he was a proud young man, that seldom let any one see what he felt. As to anything like a love affair between those two, it isn't possible.'

'Who then could have lured her away? Was any one else ever suspected.'

'Lord, no, sir. Mr. Elphinstone was the only young man that ever crossed this threshold, except Mr. Chipping, the doctor, with a wife and three children and a wart on his nose.'

'How did Elphinstone behave when Miss Leeworthy's disappearance was discovered?' asked Captain Bywater, still harping on the secretary.

'He was the only one of us that seemed to keep his senses. He was as calm and quiet as could be, ready to make himself useful in any way. He rode over to the market town before twelve o'clock, to set the constables at work. He was riding about all over the country for the next fortnight. If Miss Helen had been his sister, he couldn't have worked harder, or have seemed more anxious; which was very good of him, considering that poor Miss Helen had never taken kindly to him.'

'Was there nothing discovered, not a trace of her?'

'No, sir, nothing was ever found; nothing was ever heard. People had their fancies: some said gipsies; some said Gretna Green. But a sweet, innocent young lady of seventeen can't go off to Gretna Green by herself, can she, sir? Some talked about the river; but the poor dear wouldn't have come to harm that way unless she'd thrown herself in, and why should she do that? God bless her, there wasn't a happier young lady in the county. Ah, sir, if you could have heard her talk of you. She loved you truly. When we had stormy weather she used to come to my room looking so unhappy, and say, 'Oh! Mrs. Dill, mustn't it be dreadful for those at sea. I sha'n't sleep to-night for thinking of shipwrecks.' And I know she has spent many a wakeful night for your sake, sir, thinking of your danger and praying for you.'

'And I have thought of her in storm and in calm,' said the captain. 'Have you told me everything, Mrs. Dill—everything?'

'Yes, sir; there isn't a word more to be said. Five long years have come and gone, and we have heard nothing about her. We've left off hoping. The old gentleman is getting a little weak in his head. You won't get much out of him."

'Do you know what became of this Elphinstone? Is he still with Mr. Leeworthy?'

'No, sir. He stayed till the end of the year, and then Mr. Leeworthy's book was finished, and Mr. Elphinstone left him. Mr. Thomas had only hired him to help with the book. He was a very learned young man, I believe. I heard say that he went abroad after he left Mr. Thomas.'

Captain Bywater went to the cedar parlour to pay a duty visit to old Squire Leeworthy. He found the owner of the Grange sitting by a fire, for the fresh May breezes were sharp enough to find out the weak points in his ancient anatomy. He wore a black velvet skull cap on the top of his silver locks, and had an ivory handled cane at his side, with which to rap the floor when he wanted attendance. He was the shrunken ruin of a man who had once been handsome, commanding, and aristocratic.

'Fine weather, sir!' he exclaimed testily, in answer to the Captain's conventional remark; 'what do you mean by talking about fine weather, when the wind's in the east.'

'I haven't looked at the weathercock, Squire.'

'Weathercock be hanged, sir; when you're half as old as I am you'll want no weathercock to tell you where the wind is. You'll be your own weathercock. The east wind finds

at every joint in my body. I can feel it in my knees, in my elbows, in my wrists even. The lubricating oil is exhausted, sir. I'm dried up and shrivelled, and there's nothing left in me to resist the cold. Let me see, you're Charles Bywater, the lad that went to sea.'

'Yes, sir, I am Charles.'

'Didn't I tell you so,' cried the old man testily. 'You're Charley, and you would go to sea. They couldn't keep you at home. Your uncle was a soldier, captain in the 49th Foot. Yes, and he was killed at Corunna. Where did I tell you he was killed? Hah! at Corunna. Yes. He was killed at Corunna, you know.'

The Captain tried to look grateful for this information.

'Your mother was an uncommonly pretty woman—a little fair woman. I remember her well. She was a Vernon, and had money. Yes, she had money. I remember the bells being rung when your father brought her home. Yes, foolish thing that bell-ringing. The ringers always want money and beer—lots of beer—your father gave them beer, I daresay. I remember your father, too, a fine made man, broad shouldered, straight as an arrow. You'll never be so good-looking as your father. Young men never are. The race is degenerating, sir. The human species will be hideous in a generation or two, and every way inferior. I'm glad I sha'n't be here to see 'em.'

'I have heard the sad news about your granddaughter, sir,' said Captain Bywater, gravely.

It pained him to hear the old man twaddling on without a thought of the lost one.

'Yes, very sad. Naughty girl. She's given us a great deal of anxiety. If it hadn't been for that estimable young man—El—El—Elphindean——'

'Elphinstone!'

'Yes, Elphinstone. never could remember names. If it hadn't been for Elphindon we shouldn't have known what to do. But he was indefatigable—made every inquiry—searched in every direction.'

'And found no trace of her.'

'No, that was unfortunate. And now, let me see, it must be nearly a year since she went.'

'It is five years, sir.'

'Five years, bless my soul. How short the years are when we are going down-hill to our graves.'

After this Captain Bywater could not endure any more of the old man's society. He took a civil leave of him and went out to explore familiar scenes. Great heaven, with

what a heavy heart! Far away amidst tropical seas, under the southern cross, he had pictured to himself the joy of this return, fancied the delight of revisiting each favourite spot, with Helen by his side. He had come back, and all was gloom.

He bent his steps towards a gate that opened out of the Grange garden into a footpath that led through some meadows, park-like meadows, with good old trees overshadowing the grass, and giving beauty to the landscape. This meadow path led to the banks of a narrow winding river. The footpath and the river-bank had both been favourite walks of Helen's. How often had Charles Bywater met her there; how often had he walked with her beside the silvery unpolluted stream.

The sun was sinking as he came through the last meadow to the river side. The light was crimson behind the long line of rush, and mallow, and wild entanglement of weeds that edged the stream.

Again there flashed back upon his mind that scene in the theatre last night—the red light behind the reeds—revenge and murder.

How lonely the landscape was in that fading light. He lingered there, pacing slowly along the narrow path, till the last low streak of crimson melted into gray, and in all that time he had not met a creature, or seen a human figure in the distance, or heard any voice more human than the hoot of a far-off owl, making its melancholy moan to the swift coming night. What deed of darkness might not be done in a spot like this, unsuspected, buried in impenetrable night!

Charles Bywater left that river path with a feeling of indescribable melancholy. He could not dissociate the scene with the mystery of Helen Leeworthy's fate. It had been her favourite walk. She had come here perhaps on that last night, and some ruffian, some loathsome brute in human shape, with a wild beast's ferocity and a man's cunning, had met her in the September sunset, alone, helpless, remote from the aid of man. He fancied her in the clutches of such a wretch, like some sweet struggling bird in the talons of a hawk. Her poor little purse, with its slender stock of money, her girlish trinkets, would be enough to tempt such a brute to murder. A knife drawn quickly across the fair round throat, one faint gurgling cry, and then the splash of a body flung to the river rats, and all foul things that dwell in the nooks and crannies of the reedy bank.

'Yes, I believe she was murdered,' thought Captain

Bywater. 'It was not in that gentle spirit to be reckless of the feelings of others. If it were possible that she could leave her home in an unmaidenly fashion, it is not possible that she could leave her poor old grandfather to grieve in ignorance of her fate. She was always thoughtful of others.'

The impression was so strong upon him to-night at this spot, that it was almost as if he had seen the deed done. The picture was as vivid to his mental vision as that other picture which he had seen last night with his bodily eyes on the stage at Drury Lane.

'What comes of Dorrell's theory, that every murder is discovered?' he asked himself bitterly. 'Here is some low village ruffian who has cunning enough to keep the secret of his crime. He swoops like a hawk upon his victim, and flies off like a hawk to unknown skies. A wretch, perhaps, who could not write his name, and yet had cleverness enough to cheat the gallows.'

He walked slowly back to the village green, and the inn where his supper was waiting for him.

'I would give a good deal to see the secretary,' he thought. 'His superior intelligence might assist me. Yet if he could do nothing to unravel the mystery, while it was still fresh in men's minds, is it likely he could throw any light upon it now?'

The landlord of the Sun waited on Captain Bywater while he eat his simple supper, a meal to which he did scanty justice. He had eaten nothing since noon, yet the tender young chicken and the home cured ham were as tasteless as dust and ashes.

'You're looking very ill, sir,' said the host. 'I'm afraid it's been a shock to you hearing about poor Miss Leeworthy.'

'It has, Jarvis. I had known her from a child, remember.'

'All the village had known her from a child,' said Mr. Jarvis. 'I think it seemed to all of us as if we'd lost one of our own.'

'You told me you would have gone out of your way to avoid meeting Mr. Elphinstone, the secretary,' said the Captain, pushing away his plate, and throwing himself back in his chair. 'Why was that? was there anything repulsive about the man?'

'Well, no, sir, I can't take upon myself to say he was repulsive. He looked the gentleman, he was a neat dresser, he had a good foot and ankle, carried himself well, and was civil spoken enough whenever he condescended to open his

lips to any of us villagers, which wasn't often. But there was something inside me that turned against him, somehow, just as one man's stomach will turn against a dish that another man relishes. There was something in his dark eye that gave me a chilly feeling when he looked at me.'

'Should you call him a handsome man?'

'Far, from it, sir. He was small and insignificant. You could have passed him by in a crowd without taking notice of him, if you hadn't happened to meet his eye. That would have fixed you.'

'There was something serpent-like in it, perhaps.'

'Yes, sir—cold, and still, and stealthy, and yet piercing.'

'Did he bear a good character while he was with you?'

'I never heard any one speak against him, but he was no favourite. He was one of those well-behaved young men that nobody likes.'

This was all that Captain Bywater could hear about Mr. Thomas Leeworthy's secretary. He bade good-by to Clerevale next morning, and the coach carried him back to London. The scenes of his boyhood had become hateful to him. Everything was darkened by the shadow of his irreparable loss.

CHAPTER III.

DRIVEN BY THE FURIES.

Charles Bywater found himself in London with a long spell of idleness before him, very few friends or even acquaintance, a well-filled purse and a broken heart. The pleasures of the town could offer him no distraction, the vices of the town could not tempt him. His grief was as honest as it was deep. The dream of his life was ended. He had nothing to look forward to beyond his profession—nothing to hope for but the distinction of an honourable career, and perchance to die in a cock-pit, like Nelson, while his sailors were fighting over his head.

He ordered a suit of black, and put crape on his hat, having no doubt that the woman he loved was dead.

A week after his return he went to see Phillimore Dorrell, who was shocked at seeing the change in his friend.

'Why, man alive, what have you been doing to yourself?' he exclaimed. 'You look as if you had died and come to life again.'

'That may well be,' answered Captain Bywater, 'for the best part of me is dead.'

And then he told Dorrell his story, and asked his advice.

'You know more of the dark secrets of this wicked world than any one else,' he said, in conclusion, 'you may help me to unravel the mystery.'

'My dear Bywater, my experience in matters of this kind has led me to take a very commonplace view of such cases. I have found that when a young lady vanishes she generally knows very well where she is going. I do not believe in mysterious disappearances, or undiscovered murders.'

'You did not know Helen Leeworthy. She was little more than a child in years, and quite a child in innocence, utterly incapable of double dealing. It is my firm belief that she was waylaid and murdered within half a mile of her home.'

'And all this happened five years ago. I'm afraid, my dear Bywater, if the poor young lady did come to an untimely end at the hand of some ruffian, this will be one of those exceptional murders which go to prove my rule, that the generality of such crimes are found out. This is a case

which would interest Elyard, as a probable murder that has not come to light. He was here a few nights ago discussing his favourite thesis.'

'What a ghoulish temper the man must have to dwell upon such a revolting subject.'

'Well, I grant that his conversation savours somewhat of the charnel house. I fancy that the hit he has made in that horrible tragedy, "The Venetian Husband," has given his mind a twist in that direction. He sups full of horrors. But the man is interesting, and he exercises a powerful fascination over me. Not altogether a pleasant influence I admit. There is something snaky in his eye that chills me when I am most familiar with him. But he is no lump of common clay. He is a being of light and fire.'

'So is Lucifer,' said Captain Bywater, 'but I shouldn't consider him an agreeable acquaintance.'

'Oh, my dear Charley, this world is so given over to humdrum, so thickly peopled with a kind of human vegetable, that any man who has intellect and courage enough to be original affords an agreeable variety, no matter what turn his eccentricity takes.'

'You might say that of the man who picks your pocket.'

'Why, no, Charley, there is nothing eccentric in pocket-picking. It is the commonest thing in life, a recognized profession. Come and sup with me to-night. I have asked Elyard, and one or two others. Cast aside care for a couple of hours. Rely upon it, my dear friend, the young lady is safe and sound, and that black suit of yours is an anachronism.'

'I wish to Heaven it were so. I'll accept your invitation, though I shall be no better company than the skeleton at an Egyptian feast. I feel interested in this Elyard.'

'Naturally. The man is a genius; and genius is too rare not to be interesting.'

Captain Bywater had called at Mr. Thomas Leeworthy's house, in Bryanstone Square, and had been informed that the politician was in Paris, and not expected home for a week or ten days. He was not likely to be away longer than the latter period, his butler told the Captain, as there was a bill coming before the house in which he was keenly interested.

Captain Bywater had set his heart upon seeing Mr. Leeworthy, though there seemed little hope that Helen's uncle could help him to discover the secret of her fate, having failed in discovering it himself. But then, the Captain argued, an uncle's love and a lover's love are as different as lamp-light and forked lightning. The darkness which the

feeble glimmer of affection had failed to penetrate might be illuminated to its nethermost depth by the piercing radiance of a passionate love.

It was nearly midnight when Captain Bywater presented himself at his friend's chambers in Gray's Inn, spacious handsome rooms, with the gloomy grandeur of a departed age. A dozen or so of wax candles lightened the supper table, and a circle round it, and left the dark oak walls in profound shadow.

The party consisted of the famous actor, and two intellectual nonentities, one a sprouting barrister, whom the great criminal lawyer had taken under his wing, the other a critic on an evening paper.

There was a good deal of conversation at supper, but the host and the critic were the chief talkers. The young barrister habitually agreed with his patron, and always laughed in the right place. Captain Bywater looked on and said nothing. The actor leaned back in his chair, with his thin white hand pushed through his long black hair, and his shining eyes fixed on space. He might be listening intently to the conversation; or his thoughts might be hundreds of miles away. It was impossible to determine which.

'What a wretched supper you have eaten, Elyard,' exclaimed the lawyer, with a vexed air. 'Yet that spatchcock with mushrooms was not bad. And you have hardly tasted my Chateau Yquem. Do you never eat or drink?'

'I am not a voracious eater,' answered Elyard, in his deep and subdued voice.

Presently, when the dishes had been cleared away, and the guests had drawn closer together over their wine, Michael Elyard folded his arms upon the table, and looked steadfastly at his host.

Phillimore Dorrell touched the sailor's foot under the table, as much as to say, 'Look out for what's coming now.'

'Dorrell, did you read that case of a mysterious disappearance in to-day's *Chronicle*?'

'Yes, I saw it.'

'And do you still say there are very few murders—none even—that are not eventually found out?'

'Yes, I stick to my colours. But remember, I say "eventually." In the statistics of crime——'

'Oh, pray don't talk to me about statistics,' cried the actor impatiently. 'I think I know as much about statistics as any man; the statistics of disease, of drunkenness, of crime, of mortality. I went very deeply into statistics at one time of my life.'

Charles Bywater held his breath. He sat like a man of stone, and waited for what was coming.

'When you were at the University?' asked Dorrell.

'After I left the University. I assisted in the preparation, nay, I may go so far as to say that I was the chief author of a very important statistical work: Leeworthy's 'Facts and Figures for the People.'

'I understand,' said the lawyer, 'you did all the work and Mr. Leeworthy had all the credit, and the profit, if there was any, which I should think was doubtful. 'Facts and Figures for the People' is exactly the kind of work I should expect to find uncut in the sixpenny box at a bookstall. But what a clever fellow you must be, Elyard, to change from such dull drudgery as bookmaking to the glorious triumphs of a famous tragedian.'

'Yes, it is a change for the better,' assented Mr. Elyard, with a dismal look, and then he leaned his elbows on the table, and fixed his snaky gaze upon Phillimore Dorrell, and went back to his favourite subject, murder, as one of the fine arts. De Quincey had not then written his wonderful essay upon this theme. Burke and Hare, and even the Ratcliffe Highway murderers were still among the great men of the future. Indeed, the art of murder was just then suffering one of those intervals of mediocrity and decadence which are common to all great arts.

Mr. Dorrell warmed with the discussion. His experience was wide in the dark and winding ways of crime. He had many curious anecdotes to tell, and told them magnificently. The timepiece behind him struck half hours and hours, and still Michael Elyard listened, with his steadfast eyes rooted on the speaker, and led him on at every pause with some apposite question. The critic yawned, dozed, waked himself, and took his leave. The young stuff-gown listened, and approved and drank burgundy till his eyes began to blink and grow watery, and at last his chin fell comfortably forward on his breast, his head began to roll starboard and larboard, and his deep and steady breathing to sound like the soothing cadence of summer waves. In all this time Charles Bywater never relaxed his attention.

Just at the close of a thrilling anecdote the clock struck four, and Phillimore Dorrell started up from his chair.

'My dear fellow, I have to be in court at ten to-morrow morning,' he exclaimed, 'and here's Brunton getting absolutely apoplectic. Do you *ever* sleep, Elyard?'

'Sometimes,' answered the tragedian in his dreary voice, 'but I don't care much about it. Good night. Thank you

for a most interesting evening. I shall go and have a walk upon the bridges. I am very fond of the Thames at sunrise.'

'I shall go to bed,' said Dorrell, 'and I recommend you to do the same.'

Mr. Elyard shook hands with his host, saluted Captain Bywater and the newly awakened barrister with a stately bow, and retired. Phillimore Dorrell drew aside the dark moreen curtain and let the grey daylight into the room.

The candles had burned low in the old silver candelabra. The empty bottles and scattered fragments of the feast had a melancholy look in the chilly morning. The barrister made his adieu and hurried off; the sailor lingered.

'What do you think of him?' asked Dorrell, when he found himself alone with his old school fellow.

'What do I think of him? I think he bears the brand of Cain upon his forehead. I know that he murdered Helen Leeworthy.'

'My dear Charlie, this is midsummer madness.'

'Is it? I tell you this man is a murderer—no other than a murderer would thus harp upon the horrid theme—gloating on the knowledge of his iniquity, or else so oppressed by the weight of his guilty secret that he must talk of it, must drag it out to the light of day, must parade it in some form or other before the eyes of his fellow men. It is demoniac possession, the possession of a monomaniac driven mad by the ever present vision of one hideous crisis in his past life. He is a man of one idea. Could you not see it in the play? It is all murder from the first scene to the last—a murder contemplated—a murder done. He looks and moves like the shedder of blood.'

'If you will speak more calmly, I may be able to get at your meaning,' urged Dorrell, as the sailor paced the room, violently agitated.

'Yes, I will tell you all. I want your help.'

He explained how from that admission about the volume of statistics he had identified Elphinstone, the secretary, in Elyard the actor.

'That proves nothing against him,' said Dorrell, 'you, yourself told me that nobody suspected this Elphinstone; that he was active in the endeavour to trace the missing girl.'

'A blind to baffle suspicion. I suspect him. I saw in him from the first the possible murderer. I see in him to-night the actual murderer. His own looks, his own lips confess it. He is a man tormented by the furies.'

'Upon my honour,' ejaculated Dorrell solemnly, 'I begin to think that a murder has been done, and that it is going to be found out. That goes to establish my theory.'

'Promise me one thing,' urged the Captain. 'Don't let that man know who I am. He must have heard of me at Clerevale as an intimate friend of the family, and he would be on his guard before me. When I next meet him you can call me—anything you like—Bedford—Browning.'

'But I introduced you to him as Captain Bywater,'

'You said the name with the usual indistinctness, and there was some little confusion in the room just then. Elyard and your friend the barrister came in together, if you remember. You addressed me as Charley all the evening. No, I don't think he heard my name. So for the future you can talk of me as Captain Browning.'

'So be it—I would do more than that to oblige you.'

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE RED SUNSET.

THE long vacation had begun, the courts were closed, and Phillimore Dorrell was taking his summer holiday up the river, between Henley and Reading. He had hired a furnished cottage, was doing a little reading and a great deal of boating, and keeping open house in a jovial bachelor fashion for his chosen friends.

Among these was Charles Bywater, not the liveliest companion in the world, but too much a gentleman to pester his friend with his own particular grief, and too well-informed, unselfish and true-hearted ever to degenerate into a bore.

He was passionately fond of the Thames, and spent most of his time in the solicitor's wherry, between banks which were even lovelier then than they are now, the perky Cockney villa not having yet intruded on the sylvan serenity of the shore.

At the cottage Charles Bywater was known as Captain Browning. He had a room kept for him always, and came and went as he pleased.

'News for you, Charley,' said Dorrell, one afternoon, when his friend entered the shady little river-side garden, with the dust of the mail coach road upon his garments. 'Elyard is to be here this evening.'

'I'm very glad of that. I have been waiting my opportunity.'

'The theatre closed last night, after a season of remarkable prosperity. The managers have presented him with a diamond snuff-box. He will be in high feather, no doubt.'

'Do you think his triumphs will make any difference in him? I don't. He is tormented by memories that make happiness impossible.'

They were to dine at five, and at a few minutes before the hour Mr. Elyard arrived, looking just as he had looked that night in Gray's Inn, and very much as he looked in 'The Venetian Husband.' He shook hands with his host, gave the Captain a gloomy nod, and before they were half way through the dinner, at which he eat hardly anything, began to talk about murder.

A remarkable trial had just taken place at the Lancaste assizes.

Four men had been condemned to death for the brutal murder of an old woman and a beautiful girl of twenty. The outrage had been committed at mid-day, in a house at Pendleton, near Manchester—a house within ear-shot and eye-shot of other houses. The murderers had been seen leaving the house with their booty, they had spent their afternoon at various village taverns, and one of them had made an idiotic display of his plunder on the evening after the crime.

'With common prudence those creatures might easily have escaped the gallows,' said Elyard. 'It was their own folly that put the rope round their neck.'

'The jury felt a natural indignation against the murderers of a feeble old woman and a lovely and innocent girl,' said Dorrell. 'Had the evidence been less conclusive than it was the verdict would have been the same. Men's hearts are stronger than their heads in a case of that kind.'

'Ay,' sighed the tragedian, 'young, lovely, innocent, and foully murdered. A hard fate. And in this case, passion could plead no excuse. It was not the madness of a despised love that impelled the murderous stroke. The beautiful Hannah Partington was no victim to a revengeful lover. Such a fate would have been euthanasia as compared with hers. A sordid villain, flushed with greed of gain, wanting money to squander in a village tap-room, a wretch without passion or tenderness, without even the capacity for remorse, struck the blow. I would hang such vulgar ruffians high as Haman.'

'Would you argue that a despised and rejected love could excuse an assassin?' asked Dorrell.

'The tragedy of passion is sublime, even in its darkest depths,' answered the actor. 'Who ever thinks of Othello as of a common murderer?'

After dinner the three gentlemen strolled out upon the lawn. Phillimore Dorrell ordered the wine to be carried to a table under a willow that dipped its long green tresses into the stream, but Michael Elyard seemed in too restless a humour to enjoy the quiet of the scene.

'You do not appear to appreciate the tranquillity of your first leisure evening,' said Dorrell, 'I should have thought it would have been an infinite relief to you to find yourself a free man.'

'I miss the excitement of the theatre,' answered

with a dreary sigh, 'The country is pretty enough to look at in a picture, but the reality is somewhat oppressive.'

'Yet you endured a long residence in one of the quietest nooks in all England,' said the Captain.

'What do you mean?' asked the actor, startled.

'When you were writing your book of statistics at Clerevale.'

'Who told you that?'

'Why, man alive, don't look so scared,' cried the lawyer. It was you yourself who told us the other night at my chambers.'

'Aye, to be sure,' assented Elyard, 'but I did not think I had mentioned the name of the place. It is no matter though. There is no secret in it.'

He passed his long thin hand across his brow, and for a minute or so seemed quite lost. Then his eye wandered slowly round the scene, as if he were striving to bring his distracted thoughts back to the present.

'You have a boat, I see,' he said, glancing at the wherry moored a little way from the tree.

'Yes, I spend all my leisure upon the river. Would you like a row this evening? There will be a lovely sunset.'

'I should like it of all things.'

'Then Captain Browning shall row you. I have a post-bag of letters to write; but he's a better sculler than I am.'

Elyard gave the captain an uneasy glance, as if he hardly cared for his company, but recovered himself the next moment.

'I shall be much beholden to Captain Browning,' he said, in his stately way.

Half an hour later the captain and the tragedian were sitting in the boat gliding quietly upon the placid river, the slow dip of the oars falling with a musical rhythm, both men curiously silent, as if the stillness of the summer evening, and the loveliness of the landscape had given a melancholy colour to their thoughts.

There was a rosy glow in the west as the sun went down, which gradually deepened to a warm crimson, and intensified with every moment. They had reached a point where the stream narrowed. On the western bank there was a long fringe of reeds, behind which burned the red fires of the setting sun.

Suddenly, Charles Bywater left off rowing, and leaned forward upon his sculls.

'A picturesque bit of the river this?' he said, interrogatively.

The tragedian surveyed the landscape slowly, with his cold, dark eye.

'To my mind neither so picturesque nor so pleasing as other spots we have passed,' he answered. 'The shores are flat and dull—poorly wooded too—there is no relief for the eye, no variety.'

'But that long line of rushes, with the crimson glow behind it,' urged the captain, pointing to the western bank, 'surely that in itself is a subject for a painter.'

'I see no interest in it,' said the other coldly.

'That is strange, for it must recall the scene in your tragedy. Do you not see the resemblance?'

'Yes, now you call my attention to it. There is as much likeness as there can be between a stage play and reality, between the formal bank of a canal and the unsophisticated shore of a river.'

'Does it bring back to your mind no other scene, one which it resembles more closely—the banks of a river in Buckinghamshire, just the same reedy shore, the same red sunset. Does it not conjure up before your eye the river-bank at Clerevale, the spot where you murdered Helen Leeworthy?'

Michael Elyard started up in the boat like a man distraught. He stood gazing at his accuser, dumbfounded, horror-stricken, while the light wherry reeled with the jerk he had given it.

'You would plead that you are not as the murderers of Hannah Partington. Helen Leeworthy had rejected, perhaps even scorned your love. Secretly, stealthily, you had persecuted her with a suit that was odious to her. She threatened, it may be, to inform her relatives of your pursuit, but her gentle nature revolted against doing you this injury. Instead of doing battle with your passion, as a man or a gentleman, and conquering it, you let your passion conquer you, you abandoned yourself wholly to its sway. You let the devil get possession of you. And then one night you urged for the last time your hopeless unavailing love. You knelt, you entreated, you wept, and she remained cold as marble. And then the devil within you burst his bonds, and you slew her.'

'I did,' shrieked Elyard, these hands slaughtered her. I can feel the white round throat now in their grip. How the muscles quivered under my clutch, how the fair young form writhed in that brief agony, the strained blue eyes staring at me all the while. God! do you think they have ever ceased to haunt me with that awful stare. Day and night, waking and sleeping, I have seen them.'

He sank down in a heap at the bottom of the boat, and crouched there, looking straight before him at the swiftly

darkening landscape, and muttering to himself, as if unconscious of any other presence than his own.

'When have I ceased to see her?' he groaned. 'She has walked beside me in the crowded streets; she has come between me and the faces in the theatre. Oh, heaven! if there were any spot upon this earth where she could not come, any arid desert or hill-side cavern or snow-clad mountain where her image could not follow me, I would go and live there upon bread and water, and let the rain beat upon me, and the sun scorch me, and deem such a life happiness compared with the never ending agony of the world where she is!'

Charles Bywater turned the boat, and began to row slowly back.

Elyard never stirred. For an hour there was dead silence. At last, when they were within sight of the lighted windows of the cottage, he seemed to recover his self-possession. He raised himself from his crouching attitude at the bottom of the boat, and quietly resumed his seat.

'What is your motive for ferreting out the secret of my life, and what use are you going to make of it?' he asked.

'I'll answer your last question first. The use I mean to make of my knowledge is to bring you to the gallows. I have a warrant for your apprehension in my pocket.'

'And not a vestige of evidence against me,' said the other, with a diabolical coolness.

'I will find evidence somehow, now that I have found my man,' said the captain. 'As for my motive, you will understand that, I dare say, when I tell you my name. I am Charles Bywater!'

'Great heaven!' cried Elyard. 'Then it was instinct that made me hate you from the hour we first met.'

'No doubt. A prophetic instinct, which told you I was Helen's avenger. You leave this boat my prisoner.'

'What if I resist?'

'It would be worse than useless. I have been face to face with mutiny more than once in my life, and should not recoil from violence in a case of necessity. You are unarmed, I daresay, while I have a brace of loaded pistols in my pockets. You will be wise to come with me quietly.'

'Ay,' answered the other, lapsing into an indifferent tone. 'I can afford to let you hector it over me for a few hours. You have not a tittle of evidence against me.'

'That will be found hereafter.'

'Hereafter will not do. The first magistrate before whom you take me will dismiss your accusation with contempt.

You are unduly interfering with the liberty of a fellow subject upon the strength of an unfounded suspicion. My raving just now was a little bit of acting got up on the spur of the moment to deceive you. I wonder you let yourself be taken in so easily.'

He rose with a mocking laugh as the nose of the boat ground against the grassy shore by the willow. As his foot touched the shore a strong hand was laid upon his arm, and before he could recover himself from the surprise of that sudden grip, he found himself standing between two burly men, with both his wrists fettered.

'What does it mean?' he gasped.

'I arrest you on suspicion of being concerned in the murder of Helen Leeworthy, whose body was found last week in a hole in the river bank at Clerevale, with your handkerchief tied round her neck.'

'I told you that evidence would be forthcoming,' said Charles Bywater.

* * * * * * *

A week later Michael Elyard was found dead in his cell in the jail at Aylesbury, whither he had been carried after his examination before the magistrates at the market town near Clerevale. There had been an inquest upon the poor relics of Helen Leeworthy, a skeleton form, some tresses of golden hair, the rotted remnants of garments which were more easily recognised than the person they had clothed. The inquest had been followed by an examination before the magistrates, and coroner and magistrates had alike adjudged Michael Elphinstone, otherwise Elyard, to be the murderer. As Captain Bywater had foretold, evidence was not wanting. A gipsy came forward who had seen the young lady and her assassin together near the spot where those poor remains were found. Another witness had met Elphinstone coming away from the river path looking agitated, and well nigh distraught.

Strand by strand a rope was twisted, strong enough to hang him. But Michael Elphinstone did not wait for the public hangman and the gaping crowd in front of Aylesbury jail. With his own lean hands he strangled himself in the silence and solitude of his cell, and none knew the hour at which that dark soul took its lonely flight.

THE END.

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